

Reincarnated as a Sword (Light Novel) Vol. 9

Yuu Tanaka

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9

NOVEL

Reincarnated as a **Sword**

WRITTEN BY
Yuu Tanaka

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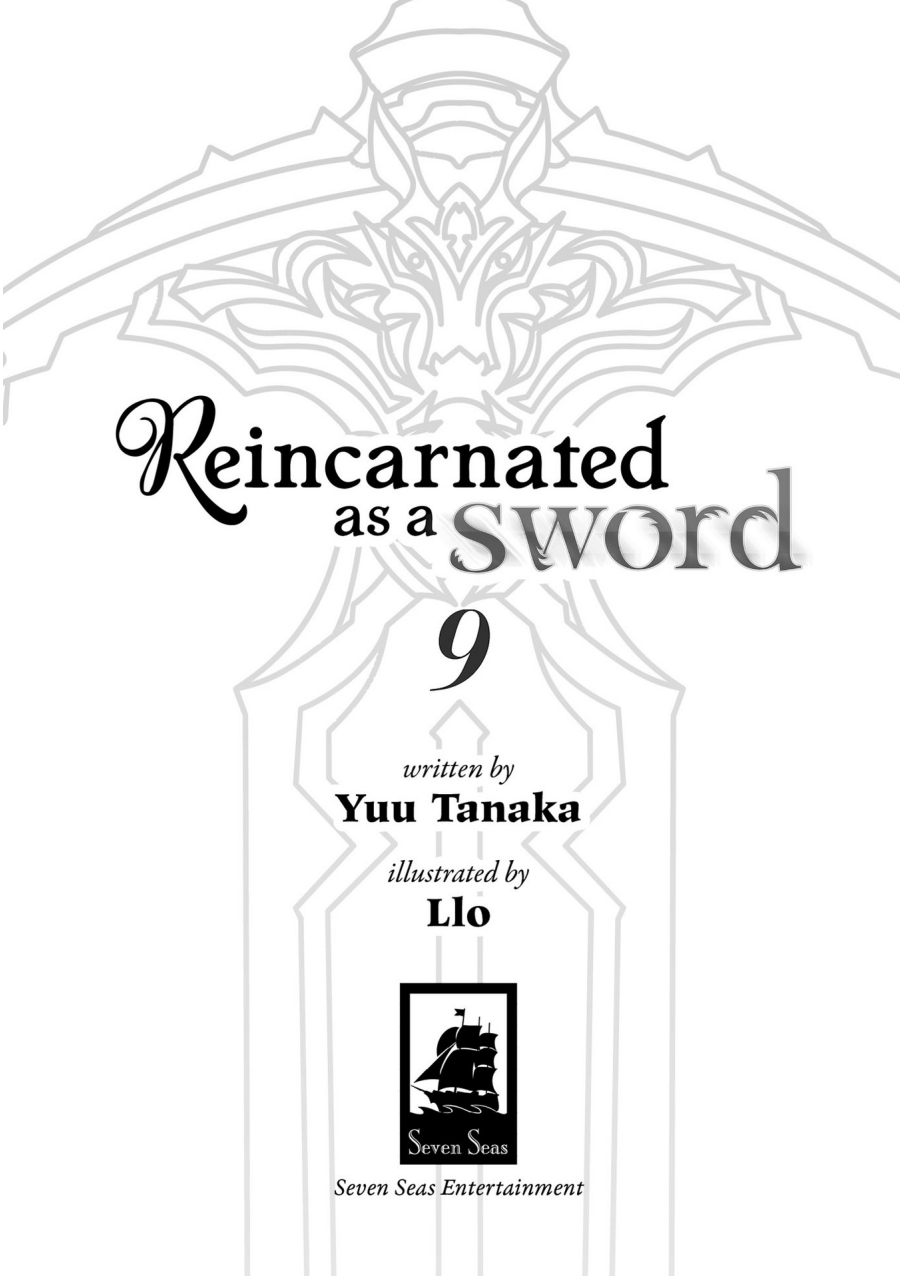
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9

written by

Yuu Tanaka

illustrated by

Llo



Seven Seas Entertainment

Tensei Shitara Ken Deshita Vol. 9
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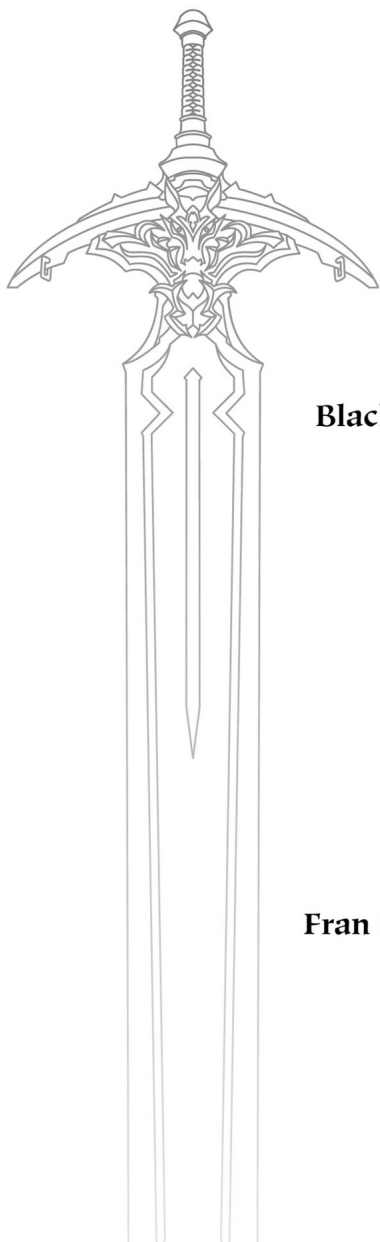
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PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64827-266-0
Printed in Canada
First Printing: October 2021
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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Chapter 1: Golden Fire Cub

Aside: Salutia

HOW LONG AGO had Fran gone north?

She was the guiding star of the Black Cat tribe, and we were lost without her. Every resident of the little village of Schwarz Katze trudged through the forest, heading for Green Goat. In the darkness, it was impossible to tell how long it had been. An hour? Twelve? Before tonight, I never understood how exhausting it was to walk through pitch darkness in fear, and yet, this was all in a day's work for adventurers like the Black Lightning Princess. They really were something else.

The children and elderly Black Cats among us were starting to struggle, but we couldn't slow down. A terrible monster army was descending from the north. It wouldn't be long before they engulfed whatever was left of our village. I knew the princess would defeat them, but some monsters would inevitably slip by her; there were thousands of them, after all. We had to reach Green Goat.

I expected the forest to be swarming with horrible creatures, but so far, the journey had been quiet. Maybe I was just being paranoid, and there were fewer monsters than I thought. I could feel the other villagers relax as they came to the same conclusion.

But the world wasn't that kind, after all.

The creatures must have been waiting for us to let our guard down. Fiends immediately surrounded us. Goblins.

"Black Cats! Stay in formation!"

"They're coming from behind!"

"Gyogyagya!"

The village soldiers took up defensive positions around us. There wasn't a single Black Cat among them, and yet these Red Dogs and White Rabbits were prepared to give their lives protecting us.

Perhaps they hoped the goblins were weak, but our hopes were soon dashed. The enemy was great in number, and most of them hid under the cover of darkness. For every one of them that our soldiers killed, ten would take its place.

"Gyaaa!"

“Moloth! No!”

It was only a matter of time until one of our guardsmen fell. He wasn't dead, but the blood was pouring out of him. One of the other soldiers took out the potion the princess gave them, but the goblins blocked their way.

“Out of the way, damn it!”

“Gya gya!”

I knew the goblins were laughing. They swarmed around Moloth, but they didn't finish him off. In an instant, I realized what they were doing: They were trying to make us panic. Goblins might not be that smart, but they were still Fiends. They knew plenty about evil. A shiver went down my spine after seeing such malice up close.

“Uwaaah!”

“Eeegh!”

Someone screamed behind us. I yelped, turning around to see more goblins closing in. They didn't attack us immediately, but hung back, eyeing our weapons. Still, it wouldn't be long before they realized that we didn't know how to use them. And, when that time came...

“!”

I opened my mouth to call for the guardsmen, but couldn't bring myself to do it when I saw the situation they were in. They were having a rough time of it; several of them were injured now, aside from Moloth. There were only five or six of them left unharmed.

They couldn't help us even if they wanted to. They might try, if we asked, but that would only put them in greater danger.

“...!”

Could I just stand here and watch this?! If only the princess were here! ...

Tears welled up in my eyes.

Princess...!

“...No.”

No. Stand here and watch? There had to be something else I could do. I looked down at the spear in my hand. The spear that Fran had made for me. I saw the steel reinforced leather armor I was wearing.

Couldn't I fight with these?

I remembered the last conversation I had with the princess.

“I can’t come with you. Will you be all right?”

“Yes. We can defend ourselves with the armaments you’ve provided us.”

“They’re good enough to beat the local monsters with!”

“Hm. Take care of the village, Salutia.”

“I will!”

“I’ll be off.”

What am I doing?!

The princess was fighting hordes of monsters to the north, while a pathetic smattering of goblins had me shaking in my boots! I didn’t even know how to fight. I’d never learned. Pathetic! No wonder the other tribes looked down on the Black Cats.

“Rrraaaaagggghhhh!”

“Salutia?”

The village elder started back from me, surprised by my battle cry. I didn’t have time to explain. I gripped my spear and thrust it directly at the goblin in front of me. To my shock, it didn’t even try to get out of the way—it just stood there and watched as I plunged my spear into its pudgy belly.

“Gyagaaa!”

“Aaaaah!”

“Gyo...”

I twisted, driving the spear deeper into the goblin’s abdomen. It shrieked and squirmed for a moment, then went quiet and limp. It was dead.

“Gya gya...!”

The other goblins froze with fear. They might be Fiends, but they were still afraid of death. I had scared them.

I felt it like a physical weight, lifting from my shoulders. I knew it was shallow of me to feel strong in the face of a weak enemy, but right now, our lives were at stake. And that meant I needed all of us to fight. It was all that Fran had asked of us.

“They’re only goblins! We can do this!” I shouted in a trembling voice.

It was pathetic, really, but I couldn’t help it. I was still afraid, and I knew that all my friends were too.

“We are lucky!” I shouted. “Remember, we have to kill Fiends to

evolve. Well, they're coming in droves! Wait until the Black Lightning Princess hears of how many we killed this night!"

It was all an act, but one of us had to be strong. How could I expect anyone else to fight when I wasn't determined to fight them myself?

"See what you hold in your hands! We are armed with weapons our princess has forged for us. Are you telling me that you won't use them?!"

No one said a word, but everyone had heard me.

The men did exactly as I had several moments ago, looking down at their weapons. When they lifted their faces, their eyes were still filled with fear, but I could tell something new had now entered into them.

"Y-You're right... We're armed now..."

"The princess made these weapons for us..."

"That's right!"

"Come on, everyone! Time to make ourselves useful!"

Determined, they readied their weapons. But some still shook in fear. They needed an extra push to get going, so I roused them with words that I knew would strike their hearts.

"Our princess is fighting for us! When she comes back, she'll be a hero! If we keep acting like cowards, we'll sully her name!"

"Y-yes..."

"A-all right, come on! I'm not gonna lose to a bunch of goblins!"

We were weak, and therefore, we had to be protected. That had been the truth of our circumstances. But it wasn't enough. Not anymore.

We had to stand and fight for the honor of the Black Cat tribe.

"Everyone! To arms!"

"Rrraaaagggghhhh!"

Fran and I were locked in furious combat with the monster army, which had just been supplemented by reinforcements. But just as we were pushed into a corner, who should come to our assistance but the beast girl, Mea, and her maid, Quina, both of whom we had just met the other day. They pushed against the Valkyrie who commanded the Fiend army, saving our skins.

Mea released a battle cry from the back of her dragon, Lind, as

he rained down fire from the sky. Her pale white skin and crimson eyes blazed in the firelight as she straddled her dragon with a grace most adventurers lacked. Even the Fiends around us stopped fighting and stared up at her, transfixed.

“Now!”

Mea must have sensed her moment. She leapt from Lind’s back with theatrical flair, plummeting to the ground from a great height, but still landing so quietly and with so much grace that I expected her feline blood had something to do with it.

Her flashiness might leave glaring holes in her defense, but Fran was more than happy to keep the Valkyrie and her monsters occupied. What’s more, Quina had stopped sending her phantoms into battle and joined the fray herself. Her Illusion Magic made for a terrifying spectacle, so I was glad to have her on our side, to say the least.

Once on the ground, Mea stared the Valkyrie down with her crimson eyes.

“Did you think you had the right to fight my rival? Only I can do that! And don’t think I’ll spare you, even if you tell me your plans.”

“I wouldn’t have told you, regardless.”

“Excellent!” Mea shouted. “Then I shall crush you. Ready, Fran?”

“Hm!”

Fran nodded determinedly, knowing we were no longer cornered. She wasn’t foolish enough to be tempted by the thrill of a single combatant duel. In fact, she was looking forward to fighting alongside Mea instead of against her.

“Quina, handle the Dullahan.”

“Heavily armored creatures are not my forte, if I’m being honest.”

“Just do it!”

“Oh, very well. Promise me you won’t be a bother to Fran.”

“Yes, yes, just go!”

The maid bowed to her shouting master and then left to face the Dullahan. Quina looked like she was walking, but she moved faster than a flat-out sprint. She must have been using some kind of skill. Truly, she was more of an assassin than a maid.

“Lind,” Mea said. “Annihilate the Fiends as you wish, but try not to get hurt.”

“Kuooooo!”

The dragon took to the skies and charged toward the heart of the horde, evading the arrows the Fiends fired at it and breathing down a wall of fire. It was enough to shake the Valkyrie's hold on her army—the monsters were starting to scatter. Lind would have no trouble mopping them up.

Mea squared off against the Valkyrie.

“Shall we get to it, then? You have threatened the lives of my people. Now, I shall deal out retribution.”

“‘My people’? A mere adventurer like you dares to speak like royalty?” The Valkyrie scoffed at Mea's apparent boast, but Mea only grinned in return.

“Hmph. You will know who I am once I unleash my full power. I may as well tell you now!”

Mea threw off her cloak and pointed her right hand at the sky. I thought for a moment that she was about to try something, but apparently, she just wanted to look cool.

“At times, I am but a simple, though beautiful, swordswoman!” She swung her left hand to the side to strike a different pose. “At times, I am a mysterious dragon tamer!”

Next, she assumed Rider #2's transformation pose. Her gestures become more intense with every motion. Did she really have to pose while giving her speech?

“But beneath all that...!”

Finally, she put both hands to her hips and puffed out her chest. As she did so, an explosion erupted behind her—a spell she'd cast herself, by my reckoning.

“I am the eldest daughter of the Beast King, Rigdith Narasimha! I am Nemea Narasimha!”

My name is Quina, and I am a maid assigned to the Beast Nation's royal family.

I entered the Royal Maid Nursery when I was two years old, not that I remember much of that period in my life. The nursery was a place that took in orphans and trained them to become maids for the royal family. Those of us who showed exceptional aptitude were assigned to the family directly, while the rest went on to serve other departments. Our training was harsh, pushing us to the brink of death, but no one was actually ever killed, nor expelled, even if they couldn't

perform up to standard. A decent lot for any orphan, and certainly infinitely preferable to dying of exposure.

Fortunately, I had a latent talent for combat, so I was assigned to work as a royal maid. I trained under the ever-watchful gaze of my seniors until I was fourteen years old. That is when I was dispatched to serve the princess.

I was introduced to her on the very day she was born. A day I will never forget.

I wasn't overwhelmed by her cuteness, nor by the dreadful weight of responsibility on my shoulders, though I did feel those things to some degree. You see, the princess was unbelievably pale. As white as paper, in fact. Red Cat babies generally have blond hair with orange-tinted skin. The blond hair of some royals had faint streaks of red, but these were far and few in between. As for the eyes, gold, silver, blue, and brown were the most common.

The princess, however, had white hair and skin. Her eyes were burning red. For a moment, I didn't understand what I was looking at.

Only later did I learn that she was a White Priestess—an extremely rare form of Red Cat, known for their special Skills and powers. Everyone was pleased by her birth. From a young age, it became clear that she was blessed with White Fire, a unique and powerful skill. According to royal researchers, with proper use and training, it could even exceed the power of the Golden Flame.

Now, I understand that certain things are expected of a princess, but the pressure put on her proved to be unbearable. Some even said that she would grow up to destroy Basharl. I thought perhaps they should try conquering it themselves before they placed all that expectation on a child, but I kept those thoughts to myself.

Still, even the Beast King himself was worried the princess would be crushed by the weight of expectation. He might seem like little more than a meathead—and a meathead he remains—but he had managed to gain some wisdom through his experience wielding raw strength. He certainly wasn't deaf to the whispers of the courtiers, who were disseminating anti-Basharl sentiments, but he couldn't simply cast out the fools. For the first time, I found myself sympathizing with a king's pain. He would run out of people if he couldn't use even the worst of his men.

Not long after, he arranged a body double for the princess, so she could be free of the royal palace—with me remaining at her side to guard her. It was a risk, but Rigdith realized that she would wither and die if they kept her locked up in that place. Instead, the princess

grew up hale and healthy and, with the blessings of a White Priestess, she was soon a force to be reckoned with in combat.

In fact, she completely destroyed a dungeon when she was thirteen. The princess hadn't yet learned to control her skills, and they went haywire—wiping a whole E-Rank dungeon off the map. She didn't just defeat it; she completely annihilated it.

It all began when we heard talk in an adventurers' guild about how a nearby dungeon was on the verge of running out of control. "It is the responsibility of the royal family to protect our citizens," the princess said, charging straight in even as I was preparing for a raid.

The first room was already packed solid with monsters on the verge of a stampede. The princess unleashed the White Fire on them, trying to hold them back. E- and D-Threat monsters were no match for the power of the White Flame, especially once it raged out of control. By the time it was all over, the princess had burned the entire dungeon and everything inside it, from the entrance all the way to the core, to cinders. One might venture to say that the dungeon itself was the sole victim that day, being utterly destroyed.

Fortunately, the princess and the anti-stampede adventuring party made it out in one piece. She still received an earful for her antics. Ah, yes, even the princess had her moments of mischief and acting out...

The princess amassed so much EXP from her folly that she evolved that day and earned herself a new title in the process. Not Dungeon Raider, as we expected, but Tyrant. I could feel the irony trickling down from the gods themselves.

After that, her enthusiasm was always getting her into trouble. But then, I have never been on the receiving end of it, so I am not worried. What does concern me is her inability to make friends her own age. Children her age felt pressured by her raw power, not to mention her royal status. They were repelled by her, even if they wanted to be friends with her.

That is, until the Black Lightning Princess came along.

The two of them hit it off right away. Of course, I had heard the rumors about a powerful Black Cat girl and had even hoped that she and the princess might become friends. But of course, as soon as they met, the princess immediately picked a fight with her. That girl really does leave me speechless sometimes.

Fortunately, Fran loved combat about as much as the princess did. It warmed my heart to see the princess finally find someone she could call a friend. She called Fran her rival, but her understanding of

the word probably encompassed friendship. I never did understand the way these brute-force types' minds worked...

After we parted with Fran, the princess and I headed south to join the battle against Basharl, but there was no way our commanders would allow the king's own daughter onto the frontlines. They didn't want to be held responsible for any unfortunate incidents on the field of battle, after all. In the end, we spent most of our time negotiating with a supply depot at the rear of the field.

The princess was pretty disgruntled after that, but she cheered up immediately when I told her we could go back to see Fran. In fact, the tactic worked so well that I might just use it again.

Either way, we headed north to meet up with Fran but, almost right away, I had a bad feeling about it. Fran's tracks eventually faded out on the road, and all we could tell was that she was heading toward Schwarz Katze. Ultimately, the princess ran out of patience, and she Awakened so that she could run at full speed. I suppose Fran's wolf familiar must be faster than we'd expected.

And then, just as we were about to catch up with her, something happened.

We arrived in Green Goat to find the whole town fortified and preparing for war. When we asked the marquis what was going on, he told us a horde of monsters was coming from the north, headed straight toward them.

A horde of monsters at this time of year? The timing was so impeccable that the whole thing reeked of conspiracy. A Basharliian conspiracy, to be more exact. They had to be involved somehow. Fran and other powerful adventurers had also been attacked by assassins, which was confirmation enough for me. The hot-blooded adventurers of our nation were eager to deliver swift retribution, and they marched to reinforce the southern front, leaving Green Goat short-handed for the northern threat.

Naturally, the princess cut right to the heart of the matter. We were told that the marquis was waiting for reinforcements before sortieing, but she immediately sprang into action.

The enemy was stronger than I expected, however. I detected monster hordes coming in from directions other than the one the scouts reported. Two of them. They were smart enough to organize into attack units. They must have a commander of some sort.

One of the enemy units had already engaged with one of our vanguard units. The vanguard unit was a small team of elite volunteers, so they would have no trouble disposing of them. If

anything, they might be a bit excessive. And so, the princess and I went to meet the smaller unit.

To my surprise, it proved to be more than a mere mob of monsters. We were faced with a unit of Fiends, all wearing the same armor and riding other monsters as steeds. They were taking orders from a Dullahan and therefore deploying actual combat maneuvers, and yet, they were no match for us. Once the Dullahan was neutralized, the rest would scatter and become easy pickings.

Once the second group was eliminated, we headed north to investigate who was behind the attack. Lind certainly made our progress much easier, but what started out as simple reconnaissance soon turned into an emergency. There was a great army of monsters out there and, fighting in the midst of them all, was Fran. All by herself.

The princess couldn't abandon her rival, so we joined the battle. I suppose I should have suspected that the princess would never be satisfied with a simple recon mission, but why send me to face a heavily armored Dullahan alone?

I really do not like fighting such creatures. Of course, I could kill one if I had to, but it did not suit my skills. My combat style revolved around exploiting my opponents' weaknesses, and now I had to fight an animated suit of armor. How awful.

Still, the princess had issued her order, and I was not going to disobey.

"It seems I am to keep you occupied," I said.

"..."

"This is why I don't like fighting the undead. You're all so quiet."

"..."

"Ah, very well. I suppose I shall be quiet too. Let's get this over with."

Enjoy life to the fullest by putting in the least amount of effort. That was my motto, but I was willing to break my own rules to live up to the princess's expectations.

"I am the eldest daughter of the Beast King, Rigdith Narasimha! I am Nemea Narasimha!"

Wait, hang on. Did I hear that right? The Beast King's daughter?

Nemea Narasimha? I still couldn't get a good Identify on her, but I knew she was speaking the truth.

I didn't even have to use Essence of Falsehood—the way she carried herself was convincing enough. No wonder she reminded me of Rigdith! She had clearly inherited his facial features as well as his demeanor.

“And now!” Mea cried. “I shall give you a taste of my powers. Awaken!”

She grinned, unleashing her full strength on the Valkyrie. Red flames engulfed Mea's body, and the air around her started to shimmer with heat. The flames intensified, then erupted in a roar.

Still, Mea's appearance didn't change much on Awakening. She was like Fran in that regard. Her short hair had more volume to it now, but that's about it, I think. It stood on end much like a lion's mane, despite the fact that she was a girl. Her nails and fangs had grown a couple of inches, too.

“You're so cool, Mea.”

Fran looked at Mea with shining eyes. She wasn't trying to flatter her now that she knew she was a princess—she really thought Mea's evolved form looked spectacular.

“Ha ha ha! That I am!”

The Valkyrie watched the scene unfold with unease.

“I see... I heard rumors that the Beast King's daughter had white hair. I suppose it is true.”

“Indeed. And here I am. We tried to keep it a secret, but the people cannot help talking about me, I suppose. Rumors tend to start that way.”

“That's quite a lot of mana you have there,” said the Valkyrie.

She was right. It felt the same as when Fran charged up Flashing Thunderclap.

“Heh heh heh,” Mea chuckled.

Then she threw back her head and laughed, full-throated, as she tore the choker away from her neck.

“...!”

Fran's eyes instantly widened in surprise. Even the Valkyrie looked more troubled.

“Something...is wrong here,” she said.

“Quite a lot of mana? I'm flattered... But do you really think

that this is all I have?"

"What?"

"I told you. I'll show you the true extent of my power!"

She struck another pose. This time, it reminded me of V3's transformation pose. Were we sure she hadn't been reincarnated from my Earth, too?

"Golden Flame of Extinction!"

The flames swirling around Mea turned divine gold at her command. Golden Flame of Extinction was a Class Skill that only the Golden Fire Lions possessed. She looked exactly like Rigdith as the golden flames covered her body.

Mea was part of the Ten Tribes, just like Fran and the Beast King. This was the reason behind Fran's surprise. As a beastman, she could tell what other beastmen had evolved into. The choker was probably manatech, meant to conceal her identity. With it gone, Fran immediately felt what she was.

Immense power and mana emanated from Mea as she used Golden Flame of Extinction. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt now that she was Rigdith's daughter. You couldn't fake that kind of royal presence. Energy swirled in currents and eddies over her body, and her aura exerted such immense pressure on her surroundings that an ordinary person would have fallen flat on their face, ended up on their rear, or just passed right out.

"There now," Mea roared. "Prepare to die!"

The flames curling around her exploded, and she charged the Valkyrie head-on, a lion wreathed in golden flame, surrounded by a menacing blend of mana and intimidation.

"Urgh!" the Valkyrie cried.

She fired off an arrow, but Mea just kept charging directly toward it.

"As if that would work!"

The arrow disappeared before it even touched her. The Golden Flame of Extinction consumed it entirely, its defensive capability so powerful that it seemed almost unfair, even against an enemy.

No, wait—some part of it must have managed to break through. A thin red line formed on Mea's pale cheek. She wasn't quite as powerful as the Beast King yet, then. But she had shown herself to be at least as powerful as Fran at full power, and we were glad for her support.

“Prepare yourself, battle maiden!” Mea cried.

“Hm!” said Fran. “Get ready!”

They both raised their swords.

“Fran,” said Mea. “You shall support me.”

“...All right.”

Fran knew that Mea was being considerate. She breathed out and deactivated Flashing Thunderclap, or I would have had to force her to do it. As a member of the Ten Tribes, Mea understood its power, and that Fran had already gone past her limits.

And with that, the battle between the two girls and the Valkyrie began.

“Yaaah!”

“Haaaa!”

Mea and Fran slashed at the Valkyrie.

“Damn it! You little brats!”

The Valkyrie winced, defending herself with her spear. She was highly skilled with it, but not skilled enough to handle two experienced swordsmen at the same time. We were finally landing hits and, even better, we had her on the run.

While they concentrated on the Valkyrie, I kept an eye on the Dullahan and the other Fiends. Fortunately, it seemed that Quina was holding her own against the Dullahan, while Lind was still raining down fire on the Fiends. Even from this distance, I could see flames pouring down like water from the sky. It’s a good thing we were on the same side.

The dragon wasn’t just fast. It seemed to ignore the physical laws of acceleration—using magic and skills to fly, rather than its wings. It could stop and turn on a dime, suggesting a spell like Vernier, although I was sure that there was more to it than that. Magic blasted from Lind’s wings as it twisted and rolled through the air. The dragon was intelligent enough to make tactical decisions. It narrowly avoided the Fiends’ pike thrusts from below, while spraying weaker bursts of fire to provoke more attacks—encouraging them to exhaust themselves. Its flight pattern was so unpredictable that they couldn’t hit it with arrows either, and every time the monsters regrouped, it roared to scare and confuse them.

Lind might not have been dealing much damage, but it was providing a solid distraction and keeping the horde away from Mea and Quina. And from Fran too. It really was just as well that we were

all on the same side. If nothing else, it meant that Fran and Mea were able to face the Valkyrie head-on.

“Flame Sword!”

“Quartet Slash!”

As the spearhead of our attack, Mea brought down her flaming sword on the Valkyrie, while Fran slashed from the other side. If the Valkyrie wanted to avoid one attack, she would have to lay herself open to the other. It was a devastating strategy.

The Valkyrie brought her spear up to block Mea’s burning blade, but it slowed her enough to give Fran a chance to attack. Excellent coordination for an impromptu team.

“Urgh! So many attacks!”

“Heh heh. Watch your step.”

“Gah!”

“Hm,” said Fran. “Too slow.”

“Argh...!”

But it didn’t seem to matter how much damage we did—it was all still being transferred to her Fiend army.

“You have Shield Arts, I see. No wonder your wounds keep disappearing.”

“What’s it do?” Fran asked.

“Shield Arts allows you to transfer an ally’s damage to yourself. Advanced Shield Arts mean you can transfer your own damage to an ally.”

“I see.”

I’d known it was Shield Arts. But its usefulness was shrinking: the Dullahan and Fiends were locked in battle, and the activation rate kept dropping as the fight went on. There was now a considerable lag before the Valkyrie’s wounds transferred over.

Fran and Mea kept pressing their advantage. This time, the Valkyrie barely had time to fire her powerful bow. Should I just use Skill Taker on her? I wouldn’t even need to take her Bow Arts to neutralize her at this point, but I held off for now. If nothing else, there was still this mysterious Murelia person who was commanding them. I needed to save myself for that encounter if I could.

“Flame Cut!”

“Kuaah!”

The Valkyrie was doing everything she could to avoid Mea’s

flames, even at the expense of getting hit by Fran's lightning. Mea had noticed it too.

"It seems that you hate flames, which burn your body, more than lightning, which inflicts instant death."

The fire was much harder for the damage transfer Shield Arts to handle, I was guessing.

"I see. You're so smart, Mea."

"Mwahaha! You have my permission to shower me with compliments!"

"Super smart."

"Mwahaha!"

The Valkyrie looked furious to see Fran holding a conversation while evading her attacks. "Can you really afford to talk in the middle of a battle?!"

"You're giving us ample opportunity to!"

"Hm. No problem."

"Urk!"

Veins bulged on the side of the Valkyrie's neck. Fran and Mea were really starting to get to her. After what she did to Fran earlier, it was pretty satisfying to watch. The Valkyrie's attacks become more disorganized every time they taunted her.

"Come now, battle maiden," Mea teased. "You were quite talkative earlier. What's the matter?"

"I guess she needs to focus, since she's in trouble."

"S-silence!"

I mean, we'd only started talking because things were finally going in our favor. They were putting enough pressure on the Valkyrie now that she couldn't talk back.

"Gotcha."

"Gaaaah!"

And with that, Fran sliced the Valkyrie's arm clean off. The damage transfer skill had reached its limit, and Mea didn't let the opening go to waste.

"I have you now!"

"Urgh...gaaaaaah!"

Mea lobbed her burning sword straight through the Valkyrie's body. The skin around the wound immediately turned as black as

charcoal and began to crumble away, but somehow, the Valkyrie still clung to life. She glared at us with hateful eyes.

“Well? Had a change of heart? Tell us what we want to know and your death shall be swift.”

“Urgh...”

“Tell us what you know about Murelia.”

“Hm. You said she’s the boss of this army.”

“...”

The Valkyrie knew she was beaten. Even as she stood there, her armor started to vanish. She didn’t have a Pocket Dimension, but she must have had some skill that allowed her to store it away at will. The half-naked battle maiden trembled on the battlefield. You could see every wound she had received so far. Her burnt side looked particularly painful, crumbling to ashes. It wasn’t a fatal blow, but still a grave one.

“Do you feel like talking now?” Mea asked.

“Yes. In fact, let me tell you this...” the Valkyrie muttered.

There was something in her hand. A jet-black spear swirling with pitch-dark mana. I recognized the way it felt. It emitted the same wavelength as the Fiendmancer, Linford, and Theraclede, once he became a half-Fiend.

The spear in the Valkyrie’s hand was made out of Fiendstone.

“You’re not getting anything out of me, even if it means my death!” the Valkyrie howled in anger. The taunting had done its job. She had to be furious at Fran for mocking her, but I thought she was angriest at herself for failing to live up to her master’s expectations.

She roared, glaring at Fran with bloodshot eyes. “Aaaaargh! I’ll kill you! I’ll massacre you! This place will be your grave!”

I felt the edge of my blade crawl. The Malice pouring out of that spear was tremendous.

Fran—

I tried to warn her, but it was too late. A torrent of Malice surged out of the Valkyrie’s black spear.

“I cannot contain its power!” the Valkyrie cried. “Take me, consume my entire soul, and turn it into pure destruction!”

Her beautiful face twisted into something hideous.

“Gaaaaaaaaaahhh!” As if in response to the Valkyrie’s animalistic roar, pillar of black light surged out of the spear. The

Malice was so thick, it was visible to the naked eye, every bit as bad as the miasma Linford emitted once he became a half-Field. It consumed the Valkyrie and everything around her.

Fran, whatever she's about to do, you need to stop her!

"Hm!"

"She who dares wins!" Mea cried.

They leaped in together as the Valkyrie readied her spear, but both of their blades were deflected by the barrier that had appeared around her. That felt similar to the one that Linford used too, although I suppose I had no way of knowing if they were exactly the same.

"This power was meant to lay waste to Green Goat," the Valkyrie screamed. "But no matter! Killing the two of you will wreak far more havoc than that. I may die, but you're going to die with me!"

Her wounds were knitting closed again, but this time, the open cuts wriggled with new flesh and black tumors, until it looked like she had been patched up with goblin hide. I Identified her again and found that she was now half-Fiend. She had also acquired the title: Slave of the Evil One. Worst of all, her stats had all increased, and now she had access to Fiendmancy.

Was this all the spear's doing? I couldn't tell. Anything related to the Evil One seemed utterly beyond explanation, but one thing was for sure: the Valkyrie was now far more dangerous.

"Fiendstone! Take my soul and destroy everything in my sight!"

The Valkyrie arched her back, and black mana poured out of her.

"Urgh, one more time, Fran!" Mea shouted.

"Hm!"

"Inferno Burst!"

"Haaaa!"

They took a few steps back and fired thunder and flame spells in toward the Valkyrie, but they all fizzled out on her barrier.

"Ugaaaahhhh!"

The Valkyrie rushed forward. Her eyes had turned black, and her voice was now more animal than human. The Fiendification was rapidly consuming her body, and the Valkyrie was losing her mind to it.

"Gaaah!"

“Argh! Bastard!”

Mea took the full impact of the Valkyrie’s spear. It was much more powerful this time, and she was knocked back by the blow.

“Mea!”

Fran rushed in to defend her, slashing straight down the Valkyrie’s spine. Fortunately, the Valkyrie’s barrier didn’t have an auto-guard function like Linford’s. This time, our attack got through. It ignored the Valkyrie’s increased defense and cut her all the way down to her back. But, almost as soon as the wound opened, it sprouted black skin, closing completely. The Valkyrie was still moving. She didn’t even look like she was in pain.

“Gaaaah!”

“Gwah!”

She kicked clean through Mea’s golden flames, sending her flying. It burned the Valkyrie’s leg to ashes from the knee down, of course, but the setback didn’t last long. Before Fran could attack again, flesh bulged from the charred stump, making a grating noise as the whole leg regenerated. Every time she healed like this, the Valkyrie became more monstrous—her flawless skin patched up with tumors and goblin meat.

“Uraaaaagh!”

She spun the heavy spear in one hand and turned to face Fran. Fortunately, we were prepared for just such a surprise attack.

Not so fast!

I deflected the spear with Telekinesis, throwing the Valkyrie off balance and making her stumble. It was the perfect time to use Fran’s Advanced Sword Art, but every time we hurt this woman, she just seemed to come back stronger—even now, when she was still burning with Mea’s flames. Across the battlefield, Mea was getting back to her feet. She’d barely managed to block that kick before it knocked her back, but she didn’t look much the worse for wear.

Mea frowned. “Damn it! This thing’s shrugging off everything we throw at it!”

“Rooooooooorrrggh!”

The Valkyrie roared, showing no sign of pain as her wounds regenerated once again.

“Waah!”

Despite her current state, she seemed to remember that the flames were more of a threat to her. She lunged after Mea and

punched her, burning her own arm away in the process. Even then, it regenerated almost immediately—replaced by grotesque-looking flesh. Mea seemed to realize that there'd be no stopping her at this rate.

“Fran, I shall charge a powerful attack!” she cried. “Keep her busy!”

She must be planning to go all out. That had a bigger chance of blowing the Valkyrie away than continuing to chip away.

“Okay!”

“Hrm!”

Mea fell back, and Fran jumped into her place. Even with the Valkyrie's boosted stats and Fran lacking Flashing Thunderclap, we could hold our own against her. It was certainly easier since the Fiends and the Dullahan were out of the way.

Haaa!

“Tsch!”

They clashed, and Fran retreated half a step to draw the Valkyrie toward her. Just as planned, the Valkyrie gave chase, turning her back on Mea. At least she was easier to fool now that she'd lost her reason.

Is it just me, or is she getting faster?

“She is.”

Not only that, but her attacks and defense were getting smoother too. Perhaps she was still getting used to her new Fiend body. Once she gained full control of herself, she'd be even *more* dangerous. We had to find a way to hold her until Mea finished charging her move.

“Impact Slash!”

Fran met the Valkyrie's spear with an Advanced Sword Art. Sword clashed against spear, and Fran was soon overwhelmed by the difference in strength. But this was all part of our plan. We could use the Valkyrie's own momentum to distance ourselves from her. As we did so, Mea charged in and her eyes met Fran's. They both knew what to do, and when. They were so in sync that I couldn't believe this was their first time as a tag team. The Valkyrie didn't even have time to react as Mea appeared behind her.

“Haaa! Golden Flame of Annihilation!”

Instead of her Drakeblade, Mea was holding a sword of compressed golden fire. The air shimmered with heat around it. How much mana did that thing even take?! I was sure Mea had to be in an altered state before she could even attempt it, much like Fran's Black Thunderfall.

“Neeeyah!”

Mea stabbed the Valkyrie in the back with her sword.

“Gaa...gaaah...”

Fire roared like a blast furnace out of the Valkyrie’s eyes and mouth, burning her up from the inside.

“Gugyaoooo!”

In an instant, she was immolated in a pillar of golden fire that shot up into the sky. I would have been a beautiful sight, were it not for the abomination at its center, screaming as her insides burned away.

“Gugaaaaah!”

Teacher!

On it!

Despite the blazing heat pouring from the Valkyrie’s body, Fran pressed her attack. She wanted to use Skycutter, one of the Sword King Arts, but it was no good. She had to be in Flashing Thunderclap to pull it off.

“Haaaa!”

Uoooooh!

As Fran launched a Pressurized Quickdraw, I magnified the size of my blade. As soon as it touched the golden fire, my blade began to melt. Fortunately, Flame Resistance stopped me from being utterly incinerated. Somehow, between that and Instant Regeneration, I managed to maintain my form.

However strong Mea’s flames were, they were still no match for the Beast King’s. When we fought him, I didn’t even notice that my blade was gone.

Fran brought me down in one almighty strike, parting the Valkyrie from head to toe. I felt the momentary snag as I absorbed her crystal, and mana flowed through my blade. We’d done it!

Here we go!

We’d pressed our offensive, and it had paid off! I didn’t care how strong the Valkyrie was—nothing could survive having its crystal taken away. The figure at the center of the fire stopped moving. It was over.

As Mea’s Golden Flame of Annihilation died down, we could see what was left of the Valkyrie—now little more than a carbonized husk of a figure, split clean in half.

I pulled my attention away and checked over the new skills I'd acquired: Advanced Bow Arts, Advanced Bow Mastery, Confusion Resistance, Light Magic, Earth Magic, Walking Assistance, and Battlemaiden. Those were all pretty rare skills. Today might prove to be our biggest haul to date. I mean, I had no idea what half of them did, but there would be plenty of time for that later.

For now, my primary concern was the Fiendmancy. So long as we had it, people might mistake us for vassals of the Evil One. And who knew what kind of adverse effects it might cause if we equipped it? No, it would be better to send it straight to the graveyard...wait. Where did it go?

Oh, did we not get Fiendmancy in the first place?

The Valkyrie clearly had it, but for some reason, it hadn't transferred across. Perhaps the skill had some special requirements? Or we couldn't obtain it because we didn't have any titles related to the Evil One? Either way, it was lucky for us, and we no longer had to worry about disposing of such a dangerous skill. No use crying over a dodged bullet, as I always say!

Still, it didn't look as though my crystal counter had gone up by as much as I'd expected. A monster of the Valkyrie's level should have netted me at least five hundred points, but I only got three hundred. And it wasn't as though Fiends had a reduced yield or anything. Had her crystal degraded because of how much power she'd used up? I guess we'd never know.

"Did we win...?" Mea asked.

"Hm..."

But the anomalies didn't end there. The Valkyrie should have been more than dead after losing her crystal and being burnt to a crisp by Mea's flames but, somehow, her body was still emitting thick, black Malice. Mea had used her trump card and fallen out of her Awakened state, but she watched the Valkyrie's smoldering corpse carefully.

Is she still alive? Fran asked.

I can feel Malice coming out of her, but...that's impossible...

Wait. The Malice was coming from the spear. Powerful Malice streamed out of the Fiendstone, through the Valkyrie's charred hand, and into her body. We had to do something.

Fran!

"Mea, the spear!"

"Of course! I see it now!"

Take this!

“Fire Javelin!”

“Haa!”

In the same moment, Fran shot a thunder spell while Mea attacked it with flame. But we *still* didn’t manage to get through its barrier. It must have some kind of special power that was protecting it.

Before we could attack again, the spear began pulsing with black light. Slowly at first, then faster and faster until somehow, inexplicably, the Valkyrie’s body reacted. Tentacles spouted between the left and right halves of her body, squirming as they drew her back together—controlling the husk of her body like some horrific marionette.

Fran and Mea recoiled from it in disgust, but they pushed their horror aside and attacked.

“Fire Arrow!”

“Haaa!”

But *again*, their spells bounced harmlessly away.

“Gaaga... gaaa...”

The creature that used to be the Valkyrie was barely even scratched.

“Gaaaga... gaaa...”

The Valkyrie’s mouth opened, and a weird grating sound came out—like the white noise on a radio. Her corpse twisted and bloated, as if there was something inside her, bursting to get out. The Malice swirling around her thickened and congealed.

Fran frowned, and Mea turned even paler. The air was turning black. Soon, it would be difficult to breathe.

When I Identified the creature, I discovered that it was no longer a Valkyrie.

Name: Fiendstone

Race: Vilefiend

Status: Vile

Title: Power of the Evil One

It was exactly like the giant monster that Linford became in Bulbola, and the Malice was only getting stronger.

“Gagagaga—”

Don't hold back, Fran! We have to go all out!

“Hm! Mea, I'm going in!”

“V-very well!”

And they both had the same idea on how to do it. They hopped away from the spear and focused their energy. We had no idea how much of a beating that barrier could take, so our only choice was to hit it with everything we had.

“Flashing Thunderclap!”

“White Flame...!”

Ooooooh!

Mea might not be in her Awakened stake, but she could still contribute to the attack. White fire wrapped around her body in place of the gold, and she took on an aura that was as intimidating as it was divine.

Was this another Golden Flame Lion skill? Or was it something unique to Mea herself? Either way, considering the intense mana gathering around her, it was certainly powerful.

Let's go! Haaaa!

For my part, I cast multiple Kanna Kamuys simultaneously. It might be the most mana I'd ever expended in one go, and it would probably exhaust me, but we couldn't risk a half-baked attack against that barrier. I overcharged the mana and stabilized the incantation.

A cold snap ran through my blade, warning me of the risk I was taking. Powerful magic wasn't supposed to be cast simultaneously like this. It might even push me beyond my breaking point. But what choice did I have? If not now, then when?

By the time I finished the indication, I was barely in control of the spell.

Die!

“Black Thunderfall!”

“Consume my enemies! White Fire!”

We attacked together: me with two Kanna Kamuys, Fran with black lightning, and Mea with her white flame. Even the Evil One's barrier was no match against our barrage of powerful spells. It managed to momentarily hold off my Kanna Kamuys, but then immediately melted away beneath the torrent of black lightning and white fire.

Every ounce of our destructive force soaked into the Valkyrie and, a moment later, she exploded. It was like standing in the middle of a bomb site, or watching an explosion in a sci-fi movie. An overwhelming wall of fire, light, sound, and heat roared across the battlefield.

“Nuoooh?!”

“Hm...!”

We were a good distance away, but Fran and Mea were almost blown away by the backdraft. Somehow, they managed to stand their ground against the typhoon-level winds, but I had no idea how long they could hold out. It was the kind of destruction I’d only ever seen on the news back home.

Acting as quick as I could, I threw up a Wind Wall to protect them from the hurricane of shrapnel. When it finally cleared, we surveyed the epicenter of the blast, but all that was left was a massive crater. It was several times bigger than any crater Kanna Kamuy left behind, and the Fiendstone spear was gone.

“What an awesome explosion,” Mea muttered.

“Hm.”

“That even scared *me* a little!”

They drew closer to the edge of the crater.

“Well?” Mea asked.

“Nothing.”

I can’t feel any Malice coming out of it either.

Both the Valkyrie and her spear were completely obliterated. Somehow, we had won. And probably just as well too. Who knew what kind of crazy magic that thing was about to throw out?

“What was that fearsome energy?” Mea asked. “It gave me goosebumps.”

“The spear,” said Fran. “It was made of Fiendstone.”

“Fiendstone...I see. So, the Evil One is involved in this after all.”

As the two of them talked, I remembered something important.

I think... I think the Dullahan’s sword was made of Fiendstone.

“That’s bad!”

“What?” Mea asked, confused.

“We have to help Quina.”

“Sure. I mean, I don’t think she’d lose to a mere Dullahan, but

the sooner we can deal with that thing, the better.”

When we arrived on the scene, the battle was still raging. That sword was definitely Fiendstone, but it wasn't behaving strangely so far. Still, we'd better help Quina as quickly as possible.

Be careful around that thing, I warned Fran. *Don't let it touch you.*

“Hm!”

As we drew closer, I used Identify on the Dullahan, but it was still just an Undead. It didn't have any skills related to the Evil One either.

What gives?

The moment the Valkyrie equipped that spear, her name and race changed, and she immediately went on the rampage as the Fiendstone consumed her soul.

Did a spear have a different effect from a sword? That couldn't be right. Most objects related to the Evil One seemed to induce madness, and this Fiendstone sword was no different.

And yet the Dullahan looked calm and composed as it fought Quina in undead silence. Wait. Could Undead even go into a frenzy? Maybe the Fiendstone couldn't possess the Dullahan precisely *because* it was Undead. After all, that meant it didn't have a soul.

Back on the floating island dungeon, a necromancer named Jean gave us a primer on the Undead. He told us that souls were the domain of the gods and could never be controlled by men. When a creature died, its soul immediately entered the presence of the gods—in short, it went to Heaven. So, while necromancers may *appear* to control souls, that was not actually the case. They only manipulated the corpse's leftover mana and willpower to make it move.

That meant this Dullahan didn't have a soul either. All it had was a crystal, or the mock soul created by a necromancer. The Fiendstone had nothing to latch onto.

So, what happens when someone gets cut by that sword?

The Valkyrie had lost her mind just by *holding* it. Getting cut by a Fiendstone blade would probably infect your soul with Malice. Could you reject its influence to stop it from controlling you? That was probably just wishful thinking.

Teacher...

You feel it too, Fran?

A faint trace of Malice was coming from Quina, and a quick Identify revealed that she was Malice Drunk. Her shoulder was

wounded, and the cut was tainted black. I told Fran about my analysis and warned her about the dangers of being cut by the Fiendstone sword.

Fran, do not let that sword cut you! You might get infected and end up like the Valkyrie.

Got it.

Could Healing or Cleansing Magic get rid of Malice? We had no way of knowing. Fran quickly repeated everything to Mea.

“What?!” Perhaps we should have left out the part about Quina getting infected. “Quina has been infected?! I’m coming, Quina!”

Aaaaaand she’s gone.

Oh, well, we’d just have to do our best to support her.

Fran, Mea’s attacks are pretty powerful, so leave it to her. Let’s run defense.

“All right.”

Fran nodded with frustration, but even she had to admit she was exhausted. I just hoped we didn’t need to use another Flashing Thunderclap to destroy the Fiendstone sword.

“We’re here to help you, Quina!” Mea cried, stepping between the maid and the Dullahan.

“Watch yourself around that sword, young lady. If you get cut, it will make you feel sick.”

“I know. Get behind me.”

“Very well.”

Quina obeyed and stepped back. They might not have the usual relationship between master and servant, but Quina trusted Mea to handle herself.

“That creature feels no pain,” Quina reported. “I can fool it with my illusions, but it would be much easier if it were still alive.”

“I see,” said Mea. “I suppose it was a bad matchup for you.”

“As I said in the beginning, I believe.”

“A-anyway,” Mea stammered. “Just run support would you, woman?!”

“Right away.”

They moved in perfect harmony: Mea attacking the Dullhan from in front with her fire, while Quina chipped away at it from behind. Neither one’s attacks interrupted the other. They both seemed

to ebb and flow perfectly around each other.

“Yaaargh!”

“...”

As the Dullahan blocked Mea’s flames with its shield, Quina crept in behind it. She grabbed its wrist and sent it flying. From here, it looked like she simply flicked the creature’s wrist and threw it through the air and into the ground. It looked like something straight out of an action comic. Mea followed up with a flame spell that blew the Dullahan even further away, and Quina sidestepped the explosion perfectly.

They made a great team, but I couldn’t tell if they were actually doing any damage. The Dullahan was bloodless and silent, which made it look almost invincible. It never slowed down, and it never felt pain or exhaustion, but it had to be starting to suffer, even if it couldn’t feel the pain.

The creature wasn’t as powerful as the Valkyrie, but it *was* equipped with a Fiendstone sword. Another large, coordinated attack was probably the best way to defeat it. Mea clearly had the same idea, for she wrapped herself in white flames and issued orders to Fran and Quina.

“We need to do the same as before and hit it with our most powerful attacks. Can you do it, Fran?”

“Hm!”

“Quina, get rid of its shield.”

“Understood.”

This time, Fran would use Kanna Kamuy, while Mea went with White Fire. Then we could finish it off with the Sword King Art, Skycutter. At least, that was the plan...

“Fran?” Mea asked.

“Hm?”

“I hope you don’t mind me finishing this one. After all, you *did* already take out the Valkyrie.”

She was farming EXP to get stronger and wanted this even more than she’d wanted those Manticore materials. But we wanted to deal the finishing blow as much as she did. Or rather, we wanted its crystal—but absorbing it would doubtless chalk the kill up to us. We could always ask for the crystal afterward, but there probably wouldn’t be much of it left after Fran and Mea hit it with all they had.

“Do you get EXP for dealing the final blow?”

“I don’t know! But it feels like you get more if you do!”

“There’s still a lot of other monsters left,” said Fran. “You can have those. Let me take this one.”

“What?” Mea frowned. “You’re more insatiable than you look! Very well, then. I won’t argue about it.”

“Thanks,” said Fran.

“Think nothing of it. I suppose you are younger than me. It is my duty to yield to you when I can.”

Fortunately for us, it looked as though Mea enjoyed playing the part of older sister. Meanwhile, Quina had managed to strip the Dullahan of its shield while Mea and Fran talked. She created an opening with a phantasm spell, then threw the creature again and wrestled its shield away.

“Now, young lady!”

“All right! Come on, Fran!”

“Hm!”

“Oooh! Consume my enemies! White Fire!”

“Taaah!”

Fran cast Kanna Kamuy a moment later. She managed to endure the intense headache it caused, although it was only about half as powerful as the one I had cast earlier. The double-pronged attack would usually be overkill, but we couldn’t take any chances. Not after what we’d seen of Fiendstone weapons so far. Mea had promised us the final blow, but I was worried there would be no crystal left by the time we got close to it. In the end, my concern was unfounded, and we were right to go overboard.

As the spells hit, the Fiendstone sword threw up a barrier to protect the shieldless Dullahan, but ultimately, it was no match for Mea and Fran. The barrier collapsed and, a moment later, the Dullahan exploded.

Unperturbed, Fran set her gaze on the heart of the explosion and charged into the blast.

“Haaaa!”

Gravel pinged off her barrier as she accelerated toward the Dullahan, raising me above her head at the center of the white-hot explosion and bracing herself for the impact.

Sword King Arts. Skycutter.

“...”

This time, I cut through Mea's White Fire and into the Dullahan like it was tofu, splitting the creature clean in half. That was the true power of a Sword King Art.



However, cracks spread down my blade like a spider web. The stress was overwhelming. Even Mea's White Fire dealt me less damage than this. Any ordinary sword would have shattered before the attack even landed, but I was able to hold my own.

What was happening? I'd only lost about half my durability when Fran hit the Valkyrie with Skycutter, but this time, it was much worse. Was I about to break? The only thing I could think was that I didn't have enough practice with Sword King Arts yet. It was ironic that Fran could handle me better than I could handle myself.

Cracks sped down my blade, making distressing sounds as they went. Still, somehow I was able to break the Dullahan's crystal, and power rushed back into my body. Unlike with the Valkyrie, my crystal counter went up by a lot this time. I guess that Fiendstone spear really had eaten away at her soul. I was close to evolving now and got myself some extra Skills. After killing so many Fiends, I already had most of them, but Mental Status Resistance would come in handy. I quite liked Resistance Skills—they offered Fran some more protection.

"Time to exterminate the stragglers," said Mea. "As promised, you shall leave most of them to me."

"Got it," Fran agreed.

"Very good. And you shall continue to run support."

"Hm."

"I shouldn't have any problems with those creatures," said Mea. "Even without Awakening."

Quina cleared her throat. "Um, young lady?"

"Well, well, well. Is this what I think it is?"

"Indeed," said the maid. "I prepared it for just such an occasion."

She handed some kind of magical potion to Mea, but I didn't see where she got it from. Her outfit hardly had that kind of storage. Could it have been under her skirt?! Truly, a maid's uniform was a mysterious thing indeed.

"What's that?" Fran asked.

"An Awakening Potion," Mea explained.

It allowed a beastman to Awaken more than once. Awakening put great stress on the body, and ordinarily, it could only be used once a day. A beastman couldn't Awaken if they were fully exhausted, but the potion reduced the stress of it. That sounded extremely effective, but that in and of itself made me doubt its safety.

"Any side effects?" Fran asked.

“Not really,” said Mea. “Not with just one. Although I won’t be able to smell very well tomorrow, or for a few days afterward.”

That was quite a dangerous side effect for a beastman, but I guess it paled in comparison to being able to Awaken multiple times.

“Looks like the monsters are scattering,” Mea observed. “We’d better hurry.”

The Fiends were still fighting even though their leader had fallen, but the other monsters were another matter. We needed to get rid of them all before they could flee into the woods. Even with backup coming for the refugees, the more random monsters we could deal with, the better.

Let’s stop them from getting away.

“Hm!”

“Do you have a plan?” Mea asked.

Fran nodded. “Leave it to me.”

The Great Wall we’d thrown up earlier was still standing, despite a few holes here and there from the Valkyrie’s arrows. But we could patch those up easily enough, and the wall would be vital in crushing the remaining monsters.

We fired off a bunch of spells, pushing the horde of monsters and Fiends back into the bottleneck. It was sealed off at the far end, but without a leader, the monsters were easily corralled. Just as we planned, their backs were soon to the wall.

The monsters were already confused and afraid, and we were more than happy to add to the harassment that Lind was providing. Monster and Fiend alike ran from Fran screaming. I guess they held her responsible for what happened to the Valkyrie. And the Dullahan.

Once the horde was funneled into the walls, Fran and Mea stood in the entrance, blocking it off.

“Excellent, Fran! Now I can destroy them all!”

And destroy them she did.

Mea’s eyes sparked as she charged into the fray, swinging her sword and unleashing flame spell after flame spell, burning away everything up to medium range. The way she fought reminded me of the way Fran and I fought together, but Mea had the added bonus of Lind providing air support.

“Kuooooo!”

The passageway was filled with the death howls of incinerated monsters.

So, what do we do now? I asked.

Help Mea.

Sure, but I don't think she needs our help, Fran.

In fact, she might even be upset if we got involved. Still, it would be good to absorb a few more crystals from notable monsters if I could, although extermination remained our top priority. After all, the battle wasn't over yet—we still had this Murelia, the Valkyrie's superior, to deal with. We needed to recuperate as much strength as we could.

For now, we erected another Great Wall across the mouth of the funnel. It cost a significant amount of mana, but it was better than wasting our energy chasing down stragglers.

“Haaaa!”

Transmogrify!

I swept through the monsters closest to us and consumed all the crystals that I could, while firing off a quick volley of spells at the ones further away. At the same time, I used Life Steal and Mana Steal to regain my strength and throw up one final Great Wall.

That about does it!

“Hm!”

It took some time, but the remaining army of monsters and Fiends were finally fenced in. Now all we had to do was hang back and provide support as Mea obliterated them all.

Then again, our help might not be needed. I already sensed a huge amount of mana amassing at the center of the horde. By the looks of it, Mea had triggered the Golden Lion's Class Skill, Golden Flames of Extinction, again. But that wasn't all. This time, the flames curling around her body were a mixture of white *and* gold. Somehow, she must be using White Fire at the same time. I had no idea how she did it, but it was a spectacular sight.

My Danger Sense wouldn't stop firing, despite the fact that all this chaos was coming from an ally. Not that I needed a skill to tell me how scary it was. The mana saturation was off the charts.

This doesn't look good.

“Hm. Are we gonna get caught in it?” Fran muttered anxiously.

Before I could answer, Quina ran straight up the Great Wall and stood beside us, surveying the carnage below. She paused for barely a moment before jumping clear on the other side.

“I'm getting out of here. You'll get caught up in that if you stay.”

She didn't need to tell us twice! Quina had been fighting right alongside Mea, so if she was quitting the battlefield, Mea must be preparing a truly devastating attack. Even Lind was retreating up to higher altitudes.

Let's get out of here, Fran.

"Hm!"

We headed after Quina, beating our escape. And then it happened.

A pillar of white-and-gold fire burst through the Great Wall. From a distance, it must have looked like a bright fountain. The walls couldn't withstand Mea's power, and the ground all around us dried up and melted away. It was just about the strangest thing I'd ever seen.

Oh, wow...

If we'd stayed where we were, we'd be done for—incinerated, or drowned in the pool of lava made from the quickly melting walls.

"Such tremendous power," said Quina. "She's put more effort into this than I thought."

"That's too much," said Fran.

"Indeed. I agree."

We could only stare back at the pillar of fire as we made our escape. I didn't sense any monsters now. Clearly, there was nothing left alive in there. Nothing, that is, besides Mea. She'd annihilated everything. Over a thousand monsters in a single attack.

"Will she be okay?" Fran asked.

Quina nodded. "Yes. Her own flames won't consume her, although she will be a little tired. I am more worried about her lack of concern for those fighting with her. She assumes anything is fair game, as long as she isn't harmed herself. It's an awful habit. She needs a good lecturing."

Quina's eyes filled with quiet fury. She looked a lot like Fran in that respect. It was always the quiet types you needed to worry about. Still, I agreed with Quina on this one. If Mea didn't learn soon, she'd incinerate her entire adventuring party one day.

Still, at least the fight was over for now. We could finally take a break.

“D_{AMMIT}, they’re catching up!”

“There’s not enough of us to hold them off...!”

Somehow, we’d managed to avoid the goblin pack without casualties, but our good fortune didn’t last. As we crossed an open field, another pack of Fiends was heading right for us. Worse still, they weren’t ordinary Fiends—it was an army of orcs and minotaurs, fully armored and mounted on beasts. And, among them, a single humanoid figure.

“It’s the Basharlians!” shouted one of the guards.

Could Basharl really be conspiring with the Fiendmancers? The enemies of all humanity? Was that why these monsters had come from the north? Had they come from Basharl? The princess was still out there. Would she be all right?

No. What was I thinking?! Of course she would be! I needed to focus on what was going to happen to us in the meantime!

“Th-there has to be something we can do!” I stammered.

“Impossible,” the guard said flatly. “We’re up against elite Fiends! On horseback!”

“Maybe we could lose them in the forest...”

Out here in the middle of the field, there was nowhere to hide. This really was the worst place to run into them. Escape was our only option, but even then, the enemy would catch up with us.

They closed the couple hundred meters between us with ease, and I cringed away from them in fear. The Fiends were nothing like the goblins we’d faced so far. They rode on giant monsters, and they were clearly coming for us. Many of the children started crying. We all knew what would happen next. The Fiends rode across the field, bringing despair with them. No help was coming, but the guards still stepped out in front to defend us. They were well trained enough to save themselves, or could have used us as bait, but they didn’t. Instead, they put their lives on the line for us.

“Run!” one of them called back to us. “Quickly!”

“Yes, we’ll buy you some time!”

Were we destined to be a burden forever? It was easy enough to say that we would stand and fight, but what if our best efforts were worthless? Without the guards there to protect us, we would have

scattered already. Maybe he was right. Maybe we *should* just run...

But my heart swelled with frustration. It was then that I realized something important: I wasn't afraid of dying. I was afraid of dying a weakling.

"We can't keep doing this..." I muttered.

"What's the matter, Salutia?"

"We can't keep doing this! We can't keep running away!"

If we did, we'd be using our weakness as an excuse forever.

"Besides," I said. "Even if we ran, they'd catch us, right?"

"W-well..." the guardsman fell silent. They knew that we couldn't make it to safety, even with a distraction.

"I don't want to die like frightened prey! If I'm going to die, then I want to die like a fighter!"

I grabbed my spear, and the guardsman laughed and clapped me on the shoulder, welcoming me in. As my friends saw what was happening, they stopped running and took up their weapons too.

"Salutia keeps stealing the show."

"She really does."

We laughed together. I knew they were just putting on a brave face. I was doing the same thing. But it was better than dying afraid.

"Let's go show them what we're made of."

"Yeah!"

"Damn straight!"

I'm sorry, princess. After everything you've done to protect us, we're going to die in this field...

"Fiends!" the human knight shouted. "Destroy those filthy animals!"

I knew he was Basharlian from the way he sneered at us.

"Bring it on!" I shouted back, trying to raise my own spirits. "We'll show you how stubborn Black Cats really are!"

That was when it happened.

"Well said, my kin!"

"Woof!"

"Huh?"

I turned around and saw a familiar face. Or rather, two familiar faces.

“Wh-what are you doing here...?”

“Lightning Bolt!”

The gray-haired woman leaped forward and shot out a bolt of lightning, leaving me behind in stunned silence. She was mounted on the back of a black wolf, who fired an orb of darkness into the Fiends. Immediately, five of them were blown away, along with their mounts.

Just as we thought we were about to die, these heroes had come to our aid. The cloud of despair lifted, and now the light poured in.

“Lady Kiara...”

“Leave everything to us, child!” she cried back. “Come, Jet!”

“Woof woof!”

What was she doing here? The last I heard, Kiara was confined to the capital. Why was Jet with her? Wasn’t he with the princess? And why was his body covered with wounds?

While we stood there in stunned silence with a million questions on our tongues, Lady Kiara proceeded to crush our enemies. In less than ten minutes, the whole unit was gone.

“W-wow...”

This was the true power of a hero. My heart swelled up with pride.

“Mwa ha ha ha! What a wonderful opportunity to test out my new powers!”

“Woof woof!”

“What?” Kiara twisted around. “You’re right, those riders are getting away. After them, Jet!”

“Woof!”

“Huh? L-Lady Kiara, wait!”

She looked back over her shoulder. “Apologies, child. But I must go after them! Worry not, the adventurers from Green Goat shall be here soon!”

“Never mind us!” I called after her. “The princess! You *must* help Fran!”

“That was the plan all along! I’ll join her as soon as I’m done here!”

“Woof!”

The princess was going to be okay. With Lady Kiara fighting beside her, we didn’t have anything to worry about. Kiara and Jet

sped away to the north, heading for the princess.

“Lady Kiara, Princess... please...just be safe.”

Chapter 2: Bad Cat

“**M**_{WA HA HA!} That’s what you get for messing with me!”

Mea emerged from the flames after obliterating the monsters and came down to meet Fran. However, Quina received her with a cold glare.

“Now then, young lady...”

“What? Uh, Quina? You’re scaring me...”

Clearly, Mea knew the maid was angry, but she seemed oblivious as to why. Did she really not understand?

“Is there anything you would like to say about executing that sort of attack while your friends were still nearby?” Quina asked. The maid really didn’t mince her words with Mea.

“Well, I... I knew it wouldn’t be a problem. Since you’d be able to make your escape. See! You’re completely unharmed.”

“Perhaps, but it didn’t feel that way with the lava hot on my heels!”

“Uhh...”

“To begin with,” Quina went on, “was an attack of that scale *truly* necessary? Surely there was a more efficient way of dealing with them after Fran so kindly fenced them in for you?”

“N-now, look here,” Mea stammered.

“I will, but not before you look *here*,” Quina said, pointing to her own cheek.

I couldn’t see anything. Mea tilted her head, obviously as confused as me.

“At what?” she asked.

“Look closely.”

Mea leaned closer, tilting her head from side to side.

“There’s nothing...”

“Can you not see the mote of ash on my face?!” Quina demanded.

“What? No! And besides, it’s a battle! You’re bound to get dirty in combat!”

“Perhaps, but generally, I am not sullied by my own allies.”

“Bah! Details, woman! Anyway, we need to figure out what to do next,” Mea said, raising her voice and changing the subject.

Quina nodded, satisfied that she’d flustered her master. “Very well, then. I believe it is time for tea.”

Tea? Now?! Quina’s mood seemed to have turned on a dime. Even Mea seemed shocked.

“What? We’re still on a battlefield, you know?”

“It is precisely *because* we are on a battlefield that it is necessary,” said Quina.

“Hm... I see your point.”

“I knew you would.”

Now they were both at it! What was going on here?! Mea was just as twisted as her maid. What kind of tea was Quina planning to serve us?

Without any further ado, she began her preparations. As it turned out, she had a *lot* to prepare!

The sight that unfolded in front of me was so strange that I had to do a double take. Somehow, Quina had managed to unpack a table from somewhere and was already setting out teacups. A teapot came next. She poured out steaming cups of hot tea and set them down next to some snacks. According to the clock, it was teatime.

“If you will, young lady.”

“Why, thank you.”

Quina pulled out a chair, and Mea sat down. As Quina started explaining the tea’s significance, I was still dazed with confusion.

“I have prepared some mana-infused tea for just such an occasion. It is made of Beast God Flower petals, and it reduces the burden of Awakening. An indulgent treat.”

“Excellent,” said Mea. “I expected nothing less.”

“Would you like some, Fran?” Quina asked. “There are some scones to go with it.”

Fran still looked tense, although not because Mea’s attack had nearly killed her. Rather, she was worried about the other Black Cats. She didn’t feel as though she could relax yet.

“Sorry,” she said. “I have to go take care of the other squadrons.”

She turned to leave, but she was so beat up that she could barely walk in a straight line.

F-Fran, are you sure that you're all right?

"Hm," she said.

But she looked deathly pale. The pressure of the battlefield and her concern for her friends was pushing her to her limits. Damn it, I should have noticed sooner!

Fran, let's take a break.

"You won't last long in a fight looking like that," Mea observed.

"The tea is made of Spirit Grass," said Quina. "It has recuperative properties and shortens the delay until you can Awaken again. Please, have some."

Thanks for backing me up, guys!

Please, Fran? Just ten minutes. I'm feeling a little tired too.

"Hm...all right."

She was still tense, but she sat down in the chair that Quina pulled out for her.

"Here you are."

"Hm."

With all these delicious treats in front of her, Fran finally took an interest—leaning in to take a deep whiff of the scones.

And so we all sat down and had a little tea party among the carbonized monster corpses and lava. Fran, Mea, and Quina all tipped their teacups. Was I really the only one who thought this was madness? I mean, for starters, where did Quina get all of this stuff from? It *looked* like she pulled it out of her skirt, but all of this was *much* more than a potion bottle or two. How could she possibly have that much storage space in there?!

It seemed Fran was just as curious as me.

"Quina, where do you keep all this?" She studied the bottom of her cup and flipped over the tablecloth, but there was nothing suspicious about any of it.

"I use a skill called Maid Manners. It's the Class Skill of Maid Chiefs."

By the looks of it, it functioned very much like a Pocket Dimension. However, Quina explained that it only allowed her to store away maid-related necessities. Still, it was down to the user to define what those necessities were, and it could even allow for *more* storage than a Pocket Dimension if they were liberal enough with their definitions.

What a weird skill! Of course, we had no use for it because we already had a Pocket Dimension...although there might be *some* advantages. For example, this wasn't a Timespace Skill, so it was unaffected by anything that restricted Timespace Magic.

"A royal Maid Chief's skill is measured by her ability to prepare contingency plans," Quina explained. "One might say it is our sole purpose."

Sole purpose... I think I'd just gained some insight into the career of a custodian.

"Speaking of manners," said Mea. "I don't think I've formally introduced myself. I am Nemea Narasimha. Princess of the Beastman Nation, D-Rank adventurer, and a Golden Fire Lion."

"Hm. I'm Fran of the Black Cat tribe. C-Rank adventurer. Black Sky Tiger."

"And you already know my maid, Quina. And my partner, Lind."

"Kuooo!"

The dragon touched down beside the tea table. When we saw it in the Forest of the Scorpion Lion, it was tiny. Now, it looked huge. Although Lind's body was smaller than Jet's, its massive wingspan more than made up for it. And to think that this enormous dragon lived in Mea's blade! That was no ordinary enchanted sword.

As soon as I thought that, Mea began voicing suspicions of her own.

"Say, Fran, what kind of sword is that?" she asked. I could feel her gaze melting a hole through my blade. "It's no ordinary magic sword, is it? Does it have a name?"

"Hm?"

Mea sat forward. "Is it a Godsword?"

Oh, no! Should we lie and try to throw her off? It seemed like Mea genuinely wanted to be Fran's friend, and I wanted to be honest with her, but still...

"Wait," Mea said, interpreting Fran's silence as indecision. "I shouldn't be the one doing all the asking. What if I tell you a secret of my own in return? How about it?"

"Secret?" Fran asked. "You mean the fact that you're a princess?"

"Oh, no one cares about that. And besides, it's dull. No, I have an even better secret than that, but if you want to hear it, you will have to tell me yours."

Teacher...?

I mean, it's a difficult situation.

Fran liked Mea, and she wanted to tell her the truth. But what if Mea told the Beast King about me? If *he* found out...

Teacher, please?

Oh, okay then.

Thanks!

How could I say no when she asked like that? I mean, I didn't want Fran to end up being targeted because of me, but if she *really* wanted to tell someone, I couldn't really argue.

"All right," said Fran.

Mea clapped her hands together. "Oh, good! I'll start."

"Young lady," said Quina. "Are you sure about this?"

"Of course! Fran is more than trustworthy!"

"Very well, then," Quina sighed. "I trust your instincts."

I sympathized with her worry. What was this secret of Mea's? Something that would make her identity as the princess of the Beast Nation seem dull? I had to admit, I was curious.

"It's about the Drakeblade Lind."

"Hm."

So, Mea's secret also revolved around her sword. That must be why she was interested in me. She took the Drakeblade from her back and laid it on the table. It sure was a beautiful sword, but that wasn't *all* it was. A certain power emanated from it. Swords always commanded a certain degree of respect; they were crafted specifically to end lives, after all. But there was more to the Drakeblade than that. I could feel the brutal mana pooling in the ornate crimson dragon as I took a closer look. I was sure it had some secrets of its own.

"It's a cool sword," said Fran.

"That it is! You see, Lind resides within it!"

"Kuoooo!" Lind roared with gratitude and pride.

"However," said Mea. "That is only a disguise!"

"Kuo!"

Mea struck a pose, and Lind spread out its wings for emphasis. Both of them were enjoying this.

"A disguise?" Fran asked.

“Indeed! For the sword’s real name is not the Drakeblade Lind, but the Cruel Dragon Sword Lindworm...”

Wait, I recognized that name. That was—

“One of the legendary Godswords!” Mea declared.

“!”

She said it so lightly that it almost didn’t seem fitting. I mean, I’m not asking for a drumroll or anything, but at least build up to it a little!

“Heh heh, shocking enough for you?” Mea asked.

“Hm!” said Fran, nodding enthusiastically.

Was this for real? When I used Identify on Mea’s sword, it was only listed as the Drakeblade Lind, but perhaps it was so powerful that I couldn’t get a good read on it? Mea seemed convinced that it was real, at least.

“It’s the genuine article,” she said, but then her expression turned sour. “Unfortunately, I don’t know how to use it properly yet. So it’s not at its full power.”

You couldn’t wield a Godsword unless you were at the apex of your own abilities. That was why Mea couldn’t manifest Lindworm’s full powers yet. Still, I didn’t quite believe it. A Godsword was a superweapon, capable of striking fear into the hearts of whole nations. And here was this world’s equivalent of a nuclear bomb, sitting innocently on the table in front of me.

It wasn’t even that its powers were completely remarkable. I mean, it could summon Lind, but it wasn’t powerful enough to annihilate an entire country. At best, it could swing the tide of a single battle in your favor. That was good going for an enchanted sword... but a *Godsword*?!

“It’s real,” said Quina. “The Godsmith confirmed it.”

That’s right, I forgot the Godsmith lived in this country. And, thanks to her royal connections, Mea could easily meet with them. I guess Lind was for real after all.

That’s pretty incredible.

Wow!

Fran didn’t think twice before accepting Mea’s words as truth. I guess Mea was right after all—this *was* more important than the fact she was a princess. A Godsword could shake the very foundations of the world. I was a little shocked that she’d told Fran so readily.

Well, then, I suppose we shall have to try to live up to your

expectations.

“Huh?” Mea looked around, startled. “Did you hear a voice? Who’s there?”

Fran smiled a little smugly. “That was Teacher.”

“Teacher?” Mea asked. “Your master? Where is he?”

“Has he turned invisible?” Quina said, I couldn’t really get a read on her. “I can’t even feel his presence. He must be quite the expert.”

“He’s not invisible,” said Fran. “Teacher is right here.”

She followed Mea’s lead and laid me on the table next to Lind. Mea blinked.

“The sword...is your teacher?”

She tilted her head in confusion. If Fran didn’t hurry up and explain, Mea would think she’d been hit on the head too many times.

“Teacher is an amazing sword. He’s an Intelligent Weapon.”

Hi. Like Fran said, I’m Teacher. Just think of me as a talking sword.

“Ooooh! I-is the sword in front of me really talking?” spluttered Mea.

“Color me surprised,” Quina said.

Mea’s eyes grew wide as saucers, while Quina continued to look unimpressed, despite her claim to being shocked.

Anyway, I said. Nice to meet you.

But Mea’s mouth was still hanging wide open. “Look! Quina, look! It’s a real-life Intelligent Weapon! Ha ha ha ha!”

Her eyes looked ready to pop out of her head. Her cheeks were flushed, and her breathing was rapid and shallow. She was like a hardcore fan who was finally meeting her idol. I’ll admit that I was a rare find, but for someone with a Godsword to have such a reaction... It was actually getting a little embarrassing.

Not that I’m not flattered, but aren’t you overreacting? I mean, you have a Godsword.

“What are you talking about?!” Mea asked. “Intelligent Weapons are the stuff of fairytales!!”

Okay, but...aren’t Godswords exactly the same?

But apparently, my understanding of the situation was lacking.

“Godswords are powerful,” Mea explained. “But there are twenty-six of them in the world, and we know exactly where most of

them are. But an Intelligent Weapon? Their existence has never been confirmed. Your existence, Teacher, is quite incredible!”

I guess that made sense, although being rarer didn’t necessarily make me any stronger. Still, Fran nodded happily.

“Hm, Teacher is the best.”

“Indeed,” said Mea. “He even managed to surprise Quina.”

“Quite,” said the maid. “I am far more surprised than I was when we first met, Fran.”

Was it my imagination, or were her cheeks flushed? Slightly. I guess she really was impressed.

“So,” said Mea, “how did Teacher fall into your possession?”

“Back when I was a slave—”

I thought Fran might hesitate, but she launched straight into the story. She told Mea about the illegal slave caravan that was using her as bait to distract monsters, how she was close to death when she found me stuck in the ground, and how we’d been traveling together ever since. Every little detail.

Back in Ulmutt, the goddess said fate didn’t exist, but how else could you explain how we met? If Fran hadn’t found me there, I would have lost my mind, and she would have lost her life. Maybe fate didn’t exist, but miracles certainly did.

Fran was never one for rhetoric, but her plain language only made her pitiful past all the more real. By the end of it, tears were streaming from Mea’s eyes.

“So that’s how it is! You two were destined to meet!”

“Young Lady, if you will.”

Quina held out a handkerchief.

“That I do!”

Mea promptly took it and blew her nose.

“What a moving story,” she said when she’d calmed down. “What a spectacular team you are.”

“Hm!” Fran agreed.

Warmed by Mea’s compliments, Fran proceeded to tell her all about my various powers and characteristics. While the information wasn’t as confidential as the whereabouts of a Godsword, it was important to me. Fran really didn’t want to keep anything from Mea.

She told her about how I got stronger by absorbing crystals, how I didn’t know where I came from, and how we were hoping the

Godsmith might know more about my origins. All of it.

“I see!” said Mea. “So that’s why there was no trace of crystal left in the Manticores! I did wonder.”

“Teacher absorbed them.”

Yeah, pretty much.

Mea shook her head. “To think of an Intelligent Weapon that can grow stronger...”

“But Lind can grow too.”

Mea shook her head at Fran’s response.

“Lind’s power matches mine. When I get stronger, he grows stronger too. He does not actually become more powerful himself, unlike Teacher. I think he may just surpass a Godsword one day.”

I mean, I was aiming to *become* a Godsword, but the thought of becoming even *stronger* than one felt like a bit of a stretch. For that to happen, I’d have to wipe out entire *armies* of monsters. Still, Fran nodded confidently.

“Of course. Teacher is the greatest. He will be the most powerful sword in the world one day.”

“Mwa ha ha ha!” Mea roared. “Then we shall have to make it a contest! Let us see whether I can unlock Lind’s full potential before Teacher becomes even stronger than a Godsword.”

“Heh. We’ll definitely win,” Fran said.

“Perhaps, but I shall not lose so easily! One day, Lind will become powerful enough to crush whole castles!”

Crush a castle? That would take a dragon at least several hundred meters long. Water Dragons were slightly bigger than large ships, and even *they* were only considered B-Threats. The kind of dragon Mea was talking about was an A-Threat at least. Such a summon would truly be a force to be reckoned with. But then, I’d expect no less from a Godsword.

And Fran had declared that I would surpass even that! Still, if that was what she wanted, I wasn’t going to give up without a fight. I guess I had a new goal to focus on. One that Fran and I could achieve together!

“How did you get Lind?” Fran asked.

“Our meeting wasn’t as dramatic as yours. I was testing my strength by exploring some ancient ruins when I accidentally discovered a hidden chamber. Lind was enshrined within it.”

“We suspected the sword had some special significance,” said Quina. “So we took it to the Godsmith. That’s when we found out what it was.”

Wait, didn’t that mean the Godsword had called Mea to it?! I mean, she seemed to think it was some kind of fluke, but I had a feeling that Lind chose her. Quina clearly agreed because she proudly, albeit discreetly, told Fran the story of how they’d happened upon the sword...wait, wasn’t she acting a little energetic for someone who’d been poisoned by Malice?

Hang on. Are you feeling okay, Quina?

“Of course. Why would I not?”

Well, you were Malice Drunk earlier...

Should she really be serving us tea at a time like this?

“That’s right!” said Mea. “I completely forgot! Are you all right?”

“Yes, I feel perfectly fine. So, that’s what it was, hm? I’ve heard of being Malice Drunk, but that was my first experience with it.”

Ultimately, it turned out that Quina knew quite a lot about it.

“It happens whenever you fight an enemy with strong Malice over a prolonged period of time. I’ve heard it described as akin to being hungover, although I do not drink, so I cannot confirm that. If it is true, then I do not understand why anyone would bother drinking. The effects seem quite unpleasant.”

Because people don’t drink to get hungover! They drink because alcohol is delicious, and a little bit quickly turns into a lot! I remember the days when I drank all the time. It seemed strange to think about it now.

“Becoming Malice Drunk can be a problem if it is left untreated,” Quina explained. “But it is purified by destroying the source. Thus, the sickness disappeared the moment you killed the Dullahan.”

And the Fiendstone sword it was carrying, which Fran and Mea made short work of with White Fire and Kanna Kamuy. Ultimately, the sword was much more fragile than the Valkyrie’s spear, perhaps because the Dullahan didn’t have a soul to devour.

“By the way,” Mea said suddenly. “What was Teacher doing in the middle of a forest? Did your blacksmith stick you in the ground there?”

Not exactly.

I told Mea about how I woke up on a pedestal and how I ended up in the Withering Forest, although I was careful to leave out the

details of how fooling around with Telekinesis left me stuck there. I was also vague about my reincarnation. There was no reason to hide it, but I didn't think she would believe that I came from another world.

"The pedestal in the Demon Wolf's Garden..." said Mea.

Ring any bells?

"Not a one!"

Excellent.

Unfortunately, Quina didn't know anything about it either. She'd never even been to Granzel.

"But...engaging in tomfoolery and getting yourself stuck because of it," she said. "You seem very *human*, Teacher."

She really was a sharp one, although maybe that was just because she'd thought about my personality for more than five seconds. I guess there was no reason Intelligent Weapons should act human. If anything, you might expect a talking sword to behave more like an object, and sound more like the PA than a living person.

All things considered, I guess I really did behave far too much like a human. I wonder if whoever made me designed me to be this way?

"Of course he seems human," said Fran. "He used to be one."

Uhhh, are you really going to tell them *everything*? I guess we could always just say I had a human soul and leave out the bit about how I came from another world. Still, Mea's eyes were already going wide again.

"A-are you serious?"

"Hm."

"But the soul is the dominion of the gods! Forging a human soul into a weapon is something only they could do!"

"Hah! I knew you were no ordinary magic sword!"

You know, she might have a point. After all, I *was* reincarnated from another world. Perhaps the gods had something to do with that. Although it seemed pretty arrogant to go around saying that, and it'd be more than a little embarrassing if it turned out to be a mere coincidence!

"Could it be that you have skills of your own?" Mea asked. "Besides the ones that Fran shares with you?"

Why do you think that?

“I once heard that skills are the expression of a soul’s power. So a sword with a human soul would have more than Telepathy and Telekinesis at his disposal.”

Well, you guessed right!

“I knew it! That’s why Fran’s skill and spell usage is so strange! I was certain there was some kind of secret to it.”

She must be talking about how Fran used Sword Arts while I cast spells at the same time. It would be impossible without Speed Thinking or Double Mind and, from the outside, it probably looked impossible even then. Mea must have noticed the anomaly by watching Fran fight, then written it off as some kind of special Skill.

“So *that’s* how you manage to execute such rapid attacks! And your Grand Spells, can Teacher use them too?”

I can.

“Incredible! Fran appears to fight alone, but in fact both of you can cast Grand Spells and you are always there, supporting her. Honestly, I think perhaps you *are* as powerful as a Godsword...”

Either way, I said. *You should know that I didn’t get involved in the duel that the two of you had. All I did was lend Fran my skills.*

“I expected no less!” Mea said. “And I am sure Fran would have refused your help, even if you’d offered it.”

Spoken like someone cut from the same cloth. They really were blood knights, the both of them.

“We are very much alike, Fran,” Mea said. “We are about the same age, from races of lions and tigers, and we both have powerful swords, and we both seek out the heat of battle.”

“Hm,” Fran said. “That’s true.”

I couldn’t argue either. It was probably a big part of why they’d grown so fond of each other so quickly.

“So... It would be very nice if, uh... You know!”

“Hm?”

Mea ground her teeth, becoming less coherent with each word.

“You know what I’m trying to say!”

We really didn’t! Fran tilted her head in confusion as Mea got increasingly tongue-tied and flushed. Fortunately, Quina came to her master’s rescue.

“I know you’re embarrassed, young lady, but Fran will not understand that you wish to be friends unless you tell her.”

“Wh-why did you have to say that?!” Mea spluttered.

Now I understood why she’d gotten so fidgety. She wasn’t the sort to talk about such things lightly, especially when she and Fran had only just met. Quina’s motivation in spelling it out was less clear. She probably said it for Mea’s own good, although she was probably teasing her at the same time. If I’d had to guess, I’d say it was 60 percent teasing and 40 percent out of kindness.

Either way, Fran spoke before Mea could get another word in.

“We already are friends. We fought together.”

“F-Fran...?” Mea stammered. Maybe they’d been comrades first, but that was still well within the realm of friendship. “Y-you’re sure about this?”

“Hm.”

“You have finally graduated from your solitary life, young lady.”

Both she and Mea seemed deeply moved. I could even detect the hint of a smile on Quina’s normally expressionless face. She had to be overjoyed. Mea had been alone for a very long time, though it wasn’t like Fran had many friends, either. I guess they were even more alike than Mea thought.

Seeing Fran’s stoic expression, Mea soon grew flustered again and returned to discussing our plans. “Right! Well, I feel rested now! Shall we carry on?”

“Hm,” said Fran. “I’ll intercept the other squadrons.”

“I really think we can leave that to the people of Green Goat,” said Mea. “Marquis Marmano is a trustworthy man. And besides, shouldn’t we investigate further north and find out where these monsters are coming from?”

Fran shook her head. “We can do that later. I need to make sure everyone’s safe.”

“I see,” Mea said, nodding quietly. Both she and Quina seemed to understand where Fran was coming from. “Very well, then. Let us go and hunt down these remaining Fiends.”

“One moment, please,” said Quina.

As we waited, she gathered up the table and everything on it and bundled it back under her skirt, like some kind of magic trick. Was it really necessary, considering how dimensional storage skills worked?

Do you really have to shove everything under your clothes like that?

“Yes. Such are a maid’s manners.”

Oh, well, I guess it was one of the prerequisites of her skill?

“Onward, then!” cried Mea. “Come, Lind!”

“Kuoooo!”

“Come, Fran. Lind is big enough to carry all three of us!”

“Kuo!”

And fast enough to get us all there quickly.

“Although,” said Mea. “I do believe the fight will already be over by the time we...huh?!”

“Hm!”

What...?!

Just as we were about to climb onto Lind’s back, a massive surge of mana swept across the northern sky, and it was approaching fast. At the speed of Lind, you might say.

“Something’s coming!” Mea shouted.

“Hm!”

Soon, the mana signature was right above us. I could physically feel it against my blade—violent and noxious.

This makes the Valkyrie look like child’s play...

Whatever it was, it had so much mana that it forced Fran and Mea to swallow hard. They would never admit it, but they were terrified. And, as if the mana wasn’t bad enough, it was soon accompanied by an equally large amount of Malice, giving us even more reason to be afraid.

Evil this deep could have come from a part of the Evil One himself. Linford had possessed more Malice than any other foe we’d faced, but this made him seem like a fraud. It was so thick that it felt like a blanket, smothering everything with evil.

As soon as they sensed it, Fran’s and Mea’s ears and tails stood on end. Whatever the source of this Malice was, it was calmly hovering above us. It was flanked by its servants on either side, but what shocked me most was that this force was coming from the body of an adorable young woman.

She looked to be in her late teens, with long black hair and a flowing white skirt that gave her a look of purity, although her ornaments were anything but pure. Bracelets with faces carved into them, groaning in agony. A pendant of black and embodied miasma. Earrings that looked like twisted spheres. All of it looked wrong somehow. And there was one more thing that troubled me about her.

“Black Cat...” Fran whispered.

She was right. This girl had black ears, a black tail, black hair... all the makings of a member of Fran’s tribe.



“To think that my whole army was wiped out by the three of you,” the girl boomed. “Worthless. But no matter. You shall at least provide sufficient nourishment.”

The monster corpses all around us began to glow, until they slowly dissolved into light. There was nothing left of them, but I felt the surge of mana flowing toward this girl. Somehow, she had drained the bodies of their last dregs of mana. The mantle of Malice around her grew faintly stronger.

I say faintly, but it was a pretty significant change, considering the immense amount of power that she had to begin with. It was like giving a million yen to someone who already had ten billion in the bank—it might not mean much to them, but to the rest of us? It was a lot. Fortunately, she hadn’t affected any of the crystals I’d absorbed, or the ones I had in storage. That was literally the only silver lining.

The girl descended from the sky as though she were riding an invisible elevator. She was guarded on either side by a beautiful Valkyrie, and a host of armored Dullahans stood behind her. These creatures were powerful enough on their own, but they were easily eclipsed by this girl’s power. How could they not be?

I shuddered as I Identified them all—the Valkyries were all far stronger than the one we’d just struggled to defeat. Meanwhile, the Dullahans were about the same—each of them as strong as five men. Still, their combat capabilities were greater than the combined strength of the monsters and Fiends we’d just killed.

Fran steeled herself. I’d never seen her hesitate before. This was bad.

“Who are you...?”

Fran had managed to stand her ground against the Beast King, but the girl in front of us defied all human reckoning. I was impressed that Fran managed not to freak out.

“I am Murelia,” said the woman. “Do you not know me?”

“I do.”

“Goodness, really?”

Know her? The Valkyrie wouldn’t shut up about her! So, *this* was Murelia? I tried to Identify her, but I couldn’t get a read.

“Ha ha. How rude, Identifying me on our first encounter? As though that would work.”

Did she have Identify Sense *and* Identity Protection? To the point of neutralizing Heavensight? Who was she?!

“So, where did you hear of me?”

“The Valkyrie told us.”

“Oh...*that*.”

For the first time, she seemed genuinely disappointed. I guess that wasn't the answer she was looking for. Meanwhile, Mea and Quina were staring at her in shock.

“You are Black Cat Murelia?” Mea asked.

“Oh, your friend there seems to know me.”

“Answer me!”

“Well, it depends on who you're talking about.”

“The queen possessed by the Evil One,” Mea said.

“I see,” she said, smiling. “Then you are correct.”

There was something unsettling about her smile, and her eyes were like deep wells, covered with bottomless darkness.

“What are you talking about?” Fran asked.

Mea took a breath. Was it my imagination, or had she turned paler?

“She was the one who brought the wrath of the gods upon the Black Cat tribe, five hundred years ago.”

Five hundred?! Had she really lived for all that time? Not even Awakened beastmen had that kind of lifespan.

“Why don't you tell the girl of my brilliant exploits?” she said, motioning to Mea with her chin.

“I... I don't know how much of this is true,” Mea said.

She proceeded to tell us the legend of Murelia. As with all legends, it was difficult to tell what had been added as it was passed down, not to mention the fact that the records of Black Cat history were destroyed by the Beast King back then. All of which meant that the story's authenticity was suspect.

“Do you know why the Black Cats were cursed?”

“Hm. They tried to use the Evil One's power.”

We didn't know the whole story, but we knew that much at least.

“Yes,” Mea agreed. “The Beast King was a Black Cat, and he tried to turn his whole tribe into Fiends to strengthen his own power. But it is said that Murelia was the one behind it.”

The Black Cat Beast King didn't start by offering his whole tribe to the Evil One. To begin with, he only wanted to strengthen his own line and hold onto the throne. But Murelia fanned the flames of his ambition. She was a B-Rank adventurer who they called the Lightning Empress. Once she gained the Evil One's blessing, she became as powerful as an A-Rank.

In fact, some of her abilities were beyond superhuman. After seeing Murelia transform before his own eyes, the Beast King sought out the Evil One's power for the rest of their tribe. Murelia was given the authority to force the plan on anyone who disagreed with her. Members of the royal family who opposed the plot were executed, and it wasn't long before the Black Cats began oppressing the other tribes.

"Murelia's story was passed on by the royal family," Mea went on. "She became notorious for her treachery and violence. Even *after* the gods cursed the Black Cats and stripped them of their powers, she continued to tarnish the tribe's reputation."

She was a member of the ruling family, but she cooperated with the Evil One and brought the wrath of the gods down on her whole tribe. The legend made her sound truly evil, but it didn't explain why she was right here in front of us.

Murelia smiled the whole time Mea was speaking, as though she didn't mind her awful reputation. But when Mea was finished, Murelia's serene expression suddenly shattered.

"That isn't exactly how I remember it," she said. "But no matter. Tell me, you're a Red Cat, aren't you?"

"I am," Mea said, assuming a defensive posture.

There was no way Murelia asked that for no reason. It was clear that she held nothing but animosity toward Mea, and it was easy to see why. Murelia was of royal blood once, before she used the Evil One's powers and the gods wiped out all trace of her. Now Mea was royalty, a descendant of the Beast King who destroyed all evidence that the Black Cats once ruled the entire Beastman Nation. To put it simply, Mea was a usurper.

The hostility in the air became palpable.

"I see... hee hee hee."

"Are you really her?" Mea asked.

"I am. The second daughter of the Beast King, the *true* Beast King. Murelia, the Empress of Lightning."

"But it's been centuries since your family held the throne."

"Yes, and it is still *unacceptable!* To think that the descendants of

such *filth* should rule our kingdom!”

I figured as much. It sounded like she knew Mea’s ancestors. As Murelia glared at the usurper, Fran broke the silence.

“Why did you do this?”

“Hmm, not one for words, are you?” Murelia asked. “But the answer is simple enough: to destroy the usurpers and bring glory to the Black Cats again.”

What?

Even now, she was rippling with Malice. She was clearly evil, and yet...could she be trying to free the Black Cats from their oppression? Maybe she had no intention of attacking Schwarz Katze in the first place? But Murelia’s expression twisted in a cold sneer, as though she was laughing at my naivete.

“Oh, my. Did you *really* believe that nonsense?” She threw back her head and laughed. “I do this for revenge, of course! Revenge on those traitors who hate and despise me! Ah ha ha ha!”

She was a bad one, all right. It was like she was a different person from the one who’d spoken before.

“I shall bring ruin to this nation and destroy everything in it! Every last man, woman, and child! I shall erase this entire nation from the earth!”

This woman was clearly insane. I had no idea if it was because of the Malice, or just the natural conclusion of her vengeful nature, but either way, her mind was twisted way beyond repair.

“But the Black Cats,” said Mea, cutting off Murelia’s mad laughter. “Your kin. They live in this country.”

Murelia turned on her. “And what of it?”

“You would really destroy them all?” Mea asked. “Along with everything else?”

The Beastman Nation were especially courteous to the Black Cats. In fact, they were practically pampered. For any other beastman, that should be reason enough to call off the invasion, but a look of pure contempt swept across Murelia’s face.

“Worthless,” she spat, glowering at Mea with contempt. “Every last one of them!”

“What?”

“Those *things* aren’t Black Cats. They’re maggots surviving only on the pity of others. They are without glory. They are no kin of mine. In fact, they tarnish the name of my tribe. Killing them would be a

mercy!”

“What...?”

“And besides,” said Murelia. “It was Black Cats who betrayed me from the very beginning...! Oh, but turning them into dungeon feed would be so wonderful! It’s such a shame they got away. Aha ha ha ha!”

Dungeon feed? What did any of this have to do with a dungeon? Was she a dungeon master?

“You attacked Schwarz Katze on purpose?” Fran asked, her glare turning suddenly cold.

“Of course,” said Murelia. She paused for a moment, then pointed at Fran. “But you are not like the others. You are Evolved. I shall let you be my servant.”

Fran ground her teeth. Murelia didn’t seem troubled by the pressure that Mea, Fran, and Quina were putting out. She did not even seem worried about losing to them. But that didn’t faze Fran either.

“I’d rather die.”

Murelia’s expression soured. “Do you not understand what I offer you? I would allow you to serve me as my slave, and you would refuse? Have you gone mad?”

“Over my dead body.”

“How dare you! Grovel before me, girl. Or you shall live to regret it.”

It felt like we were pressing against a wall. All the blood drained out of Fran’s face, and her knees buckled. An ordinary adventurer would be in tears begging for mercy, but somehow, Fran managed to answer back in a trembling voice.

“I won’t...take orders...from the likes...of you!”

Of course, Fran was afraid of the anger pouring out of such a powerful opponent, but her own anger was much greater. This woman wanted to slaughter a whole village full of Fran’s friends. Fran drew strength from that rage and shouted at Murelia with all the shame she felt for being so afraid in the first place.

“Quite stubborn, this one,” observed one of the Valkyries.

“And confident,” said the other. “Seeing as she had such a hard time with that insignificant sister of ours.”

“Nothing quite so irritating as a weakling playing the hero.”

“Do not think you can defeat us as easily as you defeated our

foolish sister. We are giving you one last chance to apologize.”

“Yes, if you apologize now, we will allow you to die after only three days of torture.”

Three days?! I had to agree with Fran: dying now seemed like a much better option than spending three days with these crazy sadists.

“Your sister,” said Fran. “The one who commanded the monsters?”

“Indeed, although she was too weak to earn a name from our master,” said the Valkyrie.

“It sickens me that we shared the same blood!” said the other.

“Our master gave her command of an entire army, and she was defeated by a little girl.”

“She was a blot on our line.”

A quick Identify revealed that these two did indeed have names: Siegrune and Rossweisse. They were like Jet—named monsters. If someone as powerful as Murelia had named them, they must have received a huge buff from it. I only took a short peek at their stats, so I didn’t know exactly how much stronger they were compared to the Valkyrie we fought earlier. Murelia seemed to have Identify Sense, so I needed to be careful. I didn’t want to provoke them for no reason. All I knew was that their stats were high and their skills were plenty, and I was pretty sure they had the Battlemaiden Skill too.

“And there you have it,” said Murelia. “And so it appears that I have an opening for a servant. Come with me and slay the rest of our tribe yourself. It will be quite amusing.”

She gave a sickening chuckle and beckoned Fran toward her. Black light streamed out of her palm.

“Or,” she said, sensing Fran’s resistance. “I could just control you, if you’d prefer.”

“Not on your life!”

“Insignificant fly! It seems a little discipline is in order. Very well. Behold!”

Murelia began an incantation. It didn’t seem like she had No Cast or Instant Cast, but I knew this incantation well. I had cast it enough times myself.

Fran, Mea, you have to stop her! She’s casting Kanna Kamuy!

“Hm! Don’t let her use it!”

“Yaaaaarrgghh!”

Fran was already moving forward, having noticed the spell even before I warned her, and Mea was soon at her side. She did well to only miss a beat or two under the immense pressure coming off Murelia.

“Oh, so you know what our master is about to do,” said one of the Valkyries.

“Perhaps you are better versed in magic than we expected,” said the other.

“Still, you shall not disturb her.”

They stepped forward to defend their master, and the Dullahans all formed up behind them. As powerful as Fran and Mea were, there was no way they could beat all of these enemies before Murelia was finished. Still, things were in our favor. As Murelia’s guard closed in on us, Fran and Mea acted as bait while Quina crept behind Murelia, disguising herself with a phantasm spell that even I couldn’t keep track of. Unfortunately, Murelia wasn’t going to fall for such tactics.

“Urgh!”

Quina failed to penetrate the barrier around Murelia and was knocked away. The shield was so powerful that it burned Quina’s arm, even though she’d barely touched it. And Murelia maintained it all while still casting a Grand Spell.

“Kanna Kamuy!” she shouted, summoning a pillar of white lightning down from the sky.

Still, it looked...strange. I wouldn’t have minded it missing us, and it would have made for a hell of a show of force even so. But Murelia’s white lightning was strangely thin. She had *definitely* cast Kanna Kamuy, but it wasn’t the Kanna Kamuy I knew. When *I* cast it, a thick pillar of lightning came crashing down from the sky. Murelia’s was barely half as wide.

Had she failed to put enough mana into it? That would make sense. I mean, I had a habit of overcharging mine. But Murelia was so powerful...I didn’t think that was likely. I watched the spear of lightning crash into the ground about fifteen meters away from us.

Kabooooooooom!

Blinding light, followed by a huge explosion.

What...is going on?!

The explosion was nothing like the spell I knew, but it certainly wasn’t just a matter of mana. Despite striking the ground so close to us, the blast wasn’t as powerful as I’d expected. We could easily overcome the shockwave by bracing slightly, but that didn’t mean it

was any less destructive.

Somehow, Murelia had focused the pillar of lightning and driven it straight into the ground. That's why the shockwave wasn't as intense—the earth had acted as a buffer for the explosion, minimizing the blast.

This Kanna Kamuy had only a tenth of its normal effective area, but the damage it dealt to the spot it *did* strike was catastrophic. I couldn't believe it, but Murelia had somehow manipulated it to increase the damage. I could manage that sort of thing with a minor, low-level spell, but with Kanna Kamuy?!

It shouldn't even be possible to manipulate a Grand Spell like that. It wasn't like focusing a Fire Arrow to make it stronger. It was more difficult than double casting. This should have been impossible. She must have a mastery of Thunder Magic and an impossible amount of mana control.

“So,” she said calmly. “Do you understand now?”

She hadn't even broken a sweat.

Fran looked down into the massive pit she'd left in the ground and swallowed.

“Very good,” said Murelia.

“...”

“I shall ask you again: die here, or become my slave. Now, choose. Ah, but the usurper and her maid shall have to go. Please do not soil yourselves while begging for your pathetic lives.”

Murelia was all smiles with Fran one second, then pure murderous desire with Mea and Quina the next. The speed of her mood swings was disturbing. It made her unpredictable. Although I very much doubted that she'd be smiling at Fran for much longer. Might as well get used to the death glare she was flashing at Mea.

And yet, despite all that, Fran's answer remained the same.

“I told you. I'd rather die than take orders from you.”

Personally, I thought it might be better to play along and create an opening, but Fran had never been big on acting.

The second Fran answered, Murelia's eyes turned to slits. There was bloodlust pooling in those eyes. There was no question about it: we were now her enemies.

“Then DIE!!”

Murelia's escort attacked as soon as she'd finished her sentence. The Valkyries were furious at how Fran had treated their master and

flew at Fran without hesitation. They'd probably been waiting to kill Fran all this time. I guess there was no harm in Identifying them now.

"How dare you reject Lady Murelia's graces!" said one. "I'll kill you!"

"Die with regret in your heart!" said the other.

And here was me thinking that Valkyries were meant to be refined! They were acting more like animals. Still, I guess they *were* monsters. And monsters that served Murelia, no less.

Siegrune and Rossweisse were Valkyrie Nemesis Lancers, and both of them were Level 67—just one level higher than the Valkyrie we faced earlier. Still, all of their stats were *much* higher. Their Agility was 100 to 200 greater, and they had Advanced Spear Mastery and Advanced Spear Arts instead of Advanced Bow Mastery. At Level 6, they were practically experts with their weapons. Their Light Magic was at a higher level too, and they had Storm Magic to boot. The lack of extraneous skills only made them more specialized for the task at hand.

Siegrune had the title Nemesis Battlemaiden, while Rossweisse had Annihilator Battlemaiden. Both titles increased their potential power and granted Frenzy to anyone under their control.

Still, I wasn't sure if they were *that* much more powerful than the Valkyrie from before. Sure, their stats were higher, but they barely had any Bow Mastery or skills for commanding an army. I guess Murelia just chose them for their raw power, but strategically, they were a bit useless.

The Dullahans weren't much different from the ones we'd fought earlier. The only difference was that their skills were focused on axe and sword rather than spear, and they seemed to be built more for offense than defense.

Fran and Mea quickly turned to meet the Valkyries, while Quina and Lind took care of the Dullahans. Each was preoccupied this way.

Meanwhile, Murelia hovered over the battlefield, watching. Content to keep her hands clean and knowing full well that she could turn the tide at any moment. She looked down at us all, both literally and figuratively.

Still, we had a chance here. I mean, I was sure we couldn't beat Murelia. There were some opponents you could never defeat, no matter how hard you tried, and Murelia was one of them. But we *could* find a way to escape. All we had to do was pull the Valkyries away from Murelia, then pop through a Dimension Gate, hop on Lind's back, and fly away as fast as possible.

It had the makings of a pretty good plan.

“Don’t even think about running away,” said Murelia.

She waved her hand and a transparent black dome, around a hundred meters across, descended over the area.

“Can’t have you using that Timespace Magic,” she said. “But don’t worry. You may not be able to teleport, however...”

She took a spear out of nowhere and threw it nonchalantly. It fizzed as it cut through the air, passing through the barrier and vanishing over the horizon. It must have traveled well over a kilometer. Her physical strength was just as monstrous as her magic.

“You see?” she said. “All you need to do is make it past the barrier. Assuming that you can, of course.”

How did she know that we had Timespace Magic? Had she seen our stats? Had she seen *mine*?! Had she figured out that I was an Intelligent Weapon? I tried reading her expression, but I couldn’t make out who she was looking at.

Maybe I was just being self-conscious. After all, she probably would have made a big deal out of it if she’d seen my parameters. She was probably just trying to stop us from using escape items like Teleport Feathers. Clearly, she wanted to watch us all suffer.

Let’s handle the Valkyries and get out from under this barrier. We can teleport away after that.

So long as Murelia stayed out of it, we had a good chance of winning this. In fact, Fran and Mea were already starting to push the Valkyries back. Fran’s Skills were higher than theirs, and besides, she had my support. She blocked the Valkyrie’s spear and landed an easy hit.

Unfortunately for Mea, her weapons skills weren’t as high as Fran’s. However, her gold flame and white fire were doing a good job of chipping away the Valkyrie’s defenses. The Valkyrie was still regenerating, but Mea just kept coming—burning and melting away the Valkyrie’s limbs even as she healed them. She had the upper hand.

Even Quina was somehow holding her own against the Dullahans. Lind struggled with such a tough opponent, but stayed up out of their reach.

“Gah! What is this strange power?!” the Valkyrie growled.

“My spear! You little bitch...!”

Even Murelia seemed surprised. She raised her eyebrows, watching the battle unfold below. Still, it didn’t take long for her

cocky grin to come back.

“My, my, you’ve melted Rossweisse’s spear,” she said, studying Mea. “Impressive. But you? That sword of yours bears further inspection.”

I felt her turn her gaze on me. She was definitely using some kind of skill. I felt like she was peeling me apart, one layer at a time, looking through the depths of my soul. Murelia gasped with delight.

“What’s this? An Intelligent Weapon?! And it even has Dimension Magic!”

What?! Do your job, Identity Protection!

Murelia’s eyes sparkled. She’d seen everything she needed to. She raised a Malice-filled hand toward me.

Fran! Murelia knows about me. Be careful!

“Hm!”

Since we couldn’t teleport, we had to rely on Fran’s Heightened Reflexes. Still, what happened next was beyond all our expectations.

“To me.”

What...?!

I don’t know what happened. By the time my mind caught up, I was out of Fran’s hand and into Murelia’s. She didn’t have No Cast, so it couldn’t have been a spell. It had to be some kind of skill.

“Teacher!”

“The sword is called Teacher?” Murelia asked. “How strange.”

Fran’s voice was tight with panic. For an instant, she was completely defenseless.

Don’t let your guard down, Fran!

“Urgh!”

The Valkyrie kicked Fran backward. Her barrier absorbed most of the impact, but the Valkyrie kept coming.

“Come on!” screamed the Valkyrie. “What’s the matter?”

“Argh!”

Fran was just managing to stay clear, but she was frantic and her attention was elsewhere. She kept glancing over at me, deathly worried.

It’s okay, Fran. This is our chance!

Murelia had brought me within striking distance. It was

practically an invitation.

I'm going to let her equip me and create a diversion! I'll be fine. Just hang in there!

Okay...

I couldn't tell whether Fran agreed with my plan, but she drew another sword and turned her attention back to the fight.

"Oh, you're so slow now!" the Valkyrie gloated. "Don't tell me you can't fight without your magic sword?!"

"Shut up."

Fran was getting hit more, and she wasn't landing so many strikes of her own, but I was too far away to keep Skill Sharing active. Still, I couldn't let this chance go. I had to trust her and find a way to get Murelia's attention.

"Now then," said my captor. "Let's see..."

Zaaap!

She must have tried to equip me. Electricity shot through her body. If I could just attack her with Telekinetic Catapult... but my chance never came. The shock didn't seem to affect her at all.

"Well, that was quite the surprise," she said.

She wasn't Awakened, but...did she somehow have Thunder Immunity regardless? Maybe it was just a high level of natural Thunder Resistance because she was a Black Cat. Or she was just strong enough that the shock made no difference. Honestly, it could be either option.

Still, if she was trying to equip me, then she was *definitely* interested. I just needed to draw her the rest of the way in. It was a big risk, but I didn't have a choice. I needed a fighting chance against such a powerful enemy.

Are you trying to equip me?

"Aha ha ha ha ha! A talking sword! And you sound so *human*! I saw you had a soul, but I didn't imagine you could talk. Oh, I want it! The child would be so happy with this sword!"

The child?

"Oh yes," she said, squealing like a little girl. "You are mine now!"

Not happening, lady! I am Fran's sword for life! Still, I could use her excitement to my advantage.

Those unworthy of wielding me will be punished by the gods. The

next shock will be nothing like the first. But...perhaps you might be strong enough to withstand it.

If I stroked her ego, maybe I could goad her into equipping me. I even threw in the bit about divine retribution to egg her on. Murelia might be resistant to thunder, but even she couldn't withstand the power of the gods. If she equipped me now, I was guaranteed a critical hit at the very least, but the excitement quickly faded from her face.

"Punished, you say? By the gods? No, I am not so foolish that I have not learned from my last engagement with them. You shall have to wait for now."

Dammit! She was thinking more clearly than I'd hoped. Oh, well, time for a change of plan.

Oh, are you afraid? What a shame! I take it back. You are not worthy to wield me, after all.

She was arrogant enough that this was bound to work, right?

"Ha! No, thank you. I have had my fill of the gods for one lifetime. As much as I hate them, I know better than to underestimate them. But to think that the gods would protect you in such a way..."

What of it?

"Are you a Godsword? One of their servants? Or is this punishment simply an internal defense mechanism they have provided you with? Whatever the case, you are certainly unique."

I guess provoking her didn't work either. She was far more cautious than her demeanor let on.

"Oh, well. Nothing to stop me from talking to you. I've never spoken to an Intelligent Weapon before."

Perhaps there was still a chance. If I could just keep her talking, maybe I could convince her to equip me after all. I could at least find out more about her and her army. She seemed genuine enough about talking to me.

Speak with me? About what?

"Let's see...about who made you. Was it a Godsmith? Or someone else?"

I don't know. I have no memory of that.

"I see. Well, in that case—"

Hold. It's my turn to ask a question now.

"Oh? How interesting. What do you want to know?"

Are you a dungeon master?

“I am not.”

Then why—

“Uh-uh. My turn.”

Very well. Ask.

I still had time. Fran had regained her calm and was holding her own against the Valkyrie. Might as well get as much information out of Murelia as I could while we were taking turns.

“You said you have no memory of your maker. What do you remember?”

Only what’s happened recently. Since shortly before I met Fran.

There was a good chance that Murelia had a Skill that could see through lies, so it was best to tell the truth. The fact she believed me right away when I said I didn’t know who my maker was only confirmed it.

I felt strange trying to win the trust of someone like her, but lying would probably stop the flow of information. On balance, it seemed worth revealing some things about myself for the sake of learning about her.

“Really?” she asked. “Is that when you were made? Or was your seal only broken then?”

Nope. My turn. You said you weren’t a dungeon master, but you spoke as though you could use a dungeon’s power. So, what are you?

“Hmm...all right. I suppose there is no harm in telling you. I am a dungeon sub-master. So I can use *part* of a dungeon master’s power. Although that rather depends on how many points I have.”

Points?

“Wait your turn. Why do you have such a stupid name?”

Stupid...? I guess I’d gotten used to it now. I’d even grown to love it. But even *I* thought it was weird when I first heard it.

Fran named me. I didn’t have a name before that.

“Nameless, hm? Perhaps you aren’t a Godsword, after all.”

My turn. What are these points?

Were they like my own Evolution Points? I was curious to find out more.

“Of all the things you could ask, you choose *that?! All right, it’s unlikely I can tell you, anyway. They’re Goddess Points—abbreviated as GP. The wretched Goddess of Chaos grants them to dungeon dwellers whenever she sees fit. I can spend them at the dungeon core*

to expand it, or summon monsters or...huh?!"

Murelia paused. She looked surprised.

"Th-there are many ways to gain these points," she went on at last. "Killing a creature inside a dungeon, for example. The more EXP the creature has, the more GP I get. That's the only reason dungeon masters even bother with adventurers. There are other methods, such as converting mana from the environment, but they aren't as effective."

This time, her eyes widened as she spoke. What had gotten into her?

"Are you...? You must be! I can talk to you about it! Aha ha ha ha!"

She sounded pleased. What exactly was going on here?

"So what are you?" she asked. "And how are you connected to the dungeons?"

What?

"You're not a Godsword... are you a thrall of the Goddess of Chaos?"

I'd like to know that myself.

I'd had a chance meeting with the Goddess of Chaos once, but she hardly provided me with a detailed explanation of my origins.

Why do you ask?

"Those who serve a dungeon are bound by that dungeon. They cannot speak of it to anyone who is unrelated to them. The fact that I can speak to *you* means that you *must* be related to them somehow. Or perhaps not."

Oh, yeah. Lumina had mentioned something similar. What was going on? Did I count as an object, and did that somehow mean I wasn't covered by the dungeon's nondisclosure rules? It seemed unlikely. That stuff was pretty detailed.

Lumina had been limited in what she could tell us, too. Although, I suppose Fran and Jet were there with me. That might be why she couldn't speak to me the way Murelia was now.

How are you connected to the dungeons?

"It wasn't always this way," said Murelia. "Many years ago, I was summoned from the presence of the Evil One and brought to a dungeon by a Fiendmancer named Linford. That old wretch! How dare he, a mere Fiendmancer, try to control a priestess of the Evil One! He turned me into a dungeon sub-master and made me a servant of the

very gods who long to destroy us. And I cannot oppose him, or the dungeon, because he is my master. How awful! And yet...the fact that I can speak to you freely...perhaps I can free myself from its control after all!"

Wait, hold up. She seemed very pleased with herself about all this, but she mentioned a *very* familiar name. An old Fiendmancer named Linford? Surely there could not be that many people who fitted that description!

Are you speaking of Linford Laurentia? A terrible old man, over a hundred years old?

"Oh, my! Do you know him?"

I did. He died on another continent.

"Ooooh! I *knew* it! The moment the bonds which tie me to this world loosened, I knew something had happened to him. Ha ha ha! I hope his death was painful!"

I hadn't expected to talk about Linford. I guess he had plans long before he came to Bulbola.

Who are you people? You say you want vengeance. Is that the same thing that Linford wanted?

"Ha ha ha! You know, I'm in such a good mood, I'll tell you that one for free!"

She was clearly in high spirits. While she spoke, I had time to check on Fran and the others. They were still holding their ground. There was time yet.

"It all started when Linford visited this country," said Murelia. "I don't know where the old bastard heard about it, but he discovered that there was a fragment of the Evil One sealed somewhere in the Beastman Nation."

There is a piece of the Evil One here?!

"Yes. It is the very same fragment my house used, you see. Linford wanted it, so that he could contact the Evil One himself."

Naturally, he couldn't find it. Ever since the incident five hundred years ago, the gods had tightened the seals on the fragments. But Linford kept trying, he scoured the whole of the Beastman Nation, then he extended his search to Basharl. After all, it used to be part of the Beastman Nation, long ago.

"He never found the seal," said Murelia. "But he *did* find something else."

Which is?

“A newly born dungeon, high in the mountains of Basharl.”

If the dungeon was new, it wouldn't have stood a chance against Linford and his cronies.

“The old bastard threatened the dungeon master and took control of it. He wanted to use the mana that it held.”

Newborn or not, it was still a dungeon. It had enough mana for a summoning. Linford carried out a Fiendish variation of the heroic summoning, which was normally used to summon a great hero from the past. Linford's variation allowed him to summon the souls of the Evil One's minions. Anyone who'd sold their soul to him was fair game.

“And that is how he summoned me. Although I was only *part* of myself at the time.”

Linford didn't have enough power to summon Murelia fully—he could only summon her mind. But that was all he needed to find where the Evil One's sealed fragment was located. He found it, but was unable to remove the seal the gods had placed on it. The gods must really have done a number on it.

“But Linford kept going.”

He had the idea of offering a large number of souls to the Evil One and using that to weaken the seal. When that was done, he'd be able to contact the Evil One through Murelia. Linford had no intention of resurrecting the Evil One, but he wanted his power. That's why he couldn't just destroy the seal.

And that's what this war's about.

“Correct. There really is nothing like a war to harvest souls.”

Fortunately for Linford, Basharl absolutely *hated* the Beastman Nation. He used his Fiendmancy to look into the Basharlion king's heart. The king was a moderate, but his hatred of the beastmen ran deep. It wasn't difficult to ensure his cooperation.

“You won't believe how many people would rather cooperate with Fiends than make peace with their neighbors. I suppose it's understandable, considering what the beastmen did to them in the past.”

Either way, it meant that Linford and Basharl's goals were aligned.

“And so they formed a plan,” said Murelia. “Basharl would mobilize their armies, while Linford arranged a pincer attack on the dungeon.”

So this war had been many years in the making. Basharl knew their forces were no match for the Beastman Nation, and they had no allies to support them. That was why their king was a moderate: he knew that even a small skirmish would prove fatal to his people. But that only made Basharl more resentful.

“There are so many human supremacists in Basharl now that I rather think they’ve lost their minds.”

The Basharlian king jumped at the chance to defeat their long-standing enemy. He must have thought their tragedy was finally at an end.

“Plenty of Basharl’s own slaves died in that dungeon, and their souls were stored away. That’s when I was fully summoned here.”

Murelia was so powerful that I was surprised anyone could control her, but I guess several hundred souls offered up to the Evil One allowed Linford to use the summoning ritual effectively. He could never fully control her, but it was enough. He made her sub-master of the dungeon he’d used to summon her, to further bind her to his purpose. No matter how strong Murelia was, she was no match for the Goddess of Chaos, who ruled the dungeon system.

At that point, all that was left was to declare war and offer the souls of all who died in it to the Evil One. With that, the seals would weaken, and Linford would be able to contact the Evil One and earn his blessing.

Oh, Goddess of Chaos...I don’t suppose you want to intervene and stop Murelia again?

The Black Cats who became Fiends were supposed to have been wiped out in the time of retribution. But now Murelia was back, and she was a dungeon sub-master. It was as absurd as summoning a goblin to make it a dungeon master. Either way, I didn’t think the gods would step in to destroy her again this time.

“I can’t fight back against Linford...” Murelia said. “But that was not enough to make me his slave. No, he had to make me an offer.”

She wasn’t just taking orders. Linford gave her incentives to keep her on his side, among which was the ability to use the dungeon’s power and grant her own desires.

“I accepted,” she said. “So that I could destroy the beastmen who betrayed me.”

No matter how much she resented Linford for trying to control her, her hatred for the beastmen was greater. She had made a dreadful first impression, and she was certainly twisted, but I was beginning to

think that the beastmen of the past did something truly horrible to her. Her resentment toward them seemed real enough.

After summoning Murelia, the dungeon was depleted of most of its power. It remained small and weak, but its territory extended over the mountains between Basharl and the Beastman Nation, providing monsters and extra military strength. Using those Goddess Points, it could summon monsters from within or take control of monsters from outside the dungeon. Since it didn't need any particular kind of monster, it could just set up a magic circle and summon them at random.

The dungeon had to get stronger to accommodate them, but that process was simple enough. Basharl gathered hundreds of slaves, took them to the dungeon, and slaughtered them—giving their life force to the dungeon. The dungeon master used to be a petty bandit, so he didn't have the guts to disobey either Linford or Basharl. The plan was perfect.

Then Linford departed in search of other ways to weaken the seal and left Murelia in charge.

I already knew what happened next: Linford came to Bulbola and carried out his research with Zelyse, until Fran and the others put an end to his evil schemes. Perhaps he employed similar kill-or-be-killed strategies in other places. Still, it made me break out in a cold sweat to think about what would have happened if Linford had returned to the Beastman Nation after receiving the Evil One's blessing in Bulbola. It all could have been so much worse.

"Hmph. I wondered why the old man's control over me had weakened. Who could have imagined that he'd get himself killed!"

Killing Linford was still the right call, but I was worried by how pleased Murelia was about it. The dungeon master didn't have much control over her to begin with. Now, with Linford dead, she was as good as free.

Murelia threw back her head and laughed.

"The old bastard's shackles are destroyed! Aha ha ha! All that's left to do now is free myself from that dungeon, and the shackles of the Goddess of Chaos!"

And what will you do when you're free? I asked, although I was pretty sure that I already knew the answer.

"Destroy the Beastman Nation and slaughter every single one of their vulgar and foolish tribes!"

Yeah, just as I'd figured. There was no way she'd spend her

freedom in quiet retirement, and there was no way I could let this woman go free.

“And you are going to help me,” she said. “What, you didn’t really think I’d let you leave after learning so much, did you?”

You told me all of that freely!

“I did, but I shall not be robbed of such a fine catch as you.”

What should I do? If I refused, Murelia would attack me, as well as Fran and the others. Could I stall for time? Or try to get her to equip me again?

As I ran through the plans in my head, black mana seeped from Murelia’s hands, thick with the taint of Malice. It formed into tentacles like a jellyfish and swarmed around me.

“Heh heh heh.”

Tch!

I tried to pull myself free with Telekinesis and lop off her arm, but I couldn’t budge. She was so strong!

Let me go!

“Ah ha ha! You’re wasting your time!”

I blasted her with Thunder and Flame Magic, but it was useless. She didn’t even bother to defend herself from the lightning. She must have been immune. Even Inferno Burst, my hardest-hitting Fire Spell, barely dented her barrier. And Timespace Magic was out, so I couldn’t teleport away or use Pocket Dimension. I was helpless.

The black tendrils twisted down my blade. Whatever was happening, it couldn’t be good. But for some reason, my Danger Sense wasn’t firing.

Damn it!

“Heh, it hurts, doesn’t it?” Murelia said, grinning sadistically. “Aren’t you miserable? Afraid? Don’t you want me to release you?”

Uhhh...if I was being honest? Not really. I wasn’t even taking chip damage, but Murelia didn’t seem to notice. She was too busy celebrating her victory.

“You know, I could free you from this agony if I wanted to. But I won’t. Not until you surrender to me. So long as you have a soul, the Evil One can still claim it!”

What was she talking about? Did she do something to me? I was beginning to doubt if these Malice tentacles were having any effect at all. I mean, I didn’t *feel* any different. Maybe she’d somehow taken

control of my body?

“Now,” she screamed. “Obey me!”

...

I didn't move. My mind was still my own, and so was my body. I could refuse her orders without issue.

“Well? I said obey me!”

I still didn't know what was happening, but I needed her to think that she'd won.

Uhhh, yes...Lady Murelia?

“Is that all? I suppose your soul may have undergone some changes when it was stuck in this sword. Never mind. Go then. Fly! You have Telekinesis, do you not?”

Yes.

I floated out of her hand and moved around a bit. My body was definitely still under my control. If I turned Telekinesis off now, I'd plummet. I don't know how, but for some reason she'd failed to command me. Still, Murelia seemed oblivious of this. She was grinning from ear to ear.

“Whatever you were plotting, it's no use to you now! You are my slave. Powerless in the face of my Malice. Aha ha ha ha! Oh, but you will make *such* a fine gift for the child!”

Again with the stuff about “the child.” Who was she talking about? Perhaps now that she was convinced I was on her side, she'd tell me.

Who is the child?

“Romeo. My dear, sweet child. Yes, you will make the perfect guardian!”

What? She had a son?! Could someone summoned back from the dead still have children? Then again, her mind was so warped that this child might not even exist anymore.

So, this Romeo—

“Silence! Enough with your questions. I have grown tired of this game. Let's see how that girl reacts when her own sword runs her through. Oh, I can't wait!”

Guess I wasn't getting any more out of her now.

“Now, go! Skewer that little girl!” she shouted, pointing at Fran.

It was a clear order, but still, my body didn't obey.

Nevertheless, she thought she had complete control over me, and she'd let her guard down. This was my chance. I ran through some ideas on how best to exploit the opportunity. Should I attack Murelia? Or use her illusion of control to return to Fran? Going back to Fran wouldn't help much if Murelia decided to pull me to her again, and Murelia's current defenseless state was a one-in-a-million chance.

But how should I attack? She probably had Thunder Immunity, so Kanna Kamuy was out. I didn't know if Telekinetic Catapult would finish her off, especially since I hadn't been able to find her crystal. Did she even have one? She used to be a Black Cat, so she should still have one, even though she was a Fiend. Still, there was the chance she didn't. Should I go for her head? Her heart? Would that kill her? I had my doubts.

What now? Think! I was running out of time!

I pushed Speed Thinking and Multi Mind to their limit. I needed to work out how to deal with her, and fast! It wouldn't be long before she started to get suspicious.

I could always max out some other spell elements to acquire more Grand Spells. I didn't know if it would work, but right now, it seemed like my only option.

I didn't meet the requirements to evolve Sword King Arts, and besides, she was probably resistant to physical damage. Without Fran's help, Skycutter would be difficult to use, and I had no idea if that would hurt Murelia either.

No, magic was my only option. But I only had 11 EP left. The only ones I could max out with that were Flame and Earth. I searched my memory bank for other elements I could use and found Light, Wood, and Sand. Apparently, I'd absorbed them from some of Murelia's minions. But all of them were at Level 1, so they were useless.

Hold on. Could I make a show of attacking Fran and then attack the Valkyrie instead? Maybe I could even claim that it was an accident, and Murelia's mind control was messing with my coordination. If I could pull it off, I'd gain another crystal and be able to evolve. Then I could max out a whole bunch of spells.

But, if I did that, Murelia wouldn't let me near her again, and might even turn against me if she saw my maxed-out spells. I guess I needed to exploit the opportunity I already had, rather than trying some elaborate setup.

But what to do...??

I scrolled through my memory banks, desperately looking for a skill that might be of some use and, just like that, my prayers were answered.

Fiend Crusher: Greatly multiplies damage to Fiends. Applies the effect Fiend Seal.

An anti-Fiend Skill?!

It must have only been added after I spent a certain amount of EP, like Identity Protection and Monstrology. I probably got it back when I hit Rank 15.

That was a *much* better option than randomly spending points on magic and hoping that it worked.

Don't let me down, Fiend Crusher!

It seemed like the skill most likely to get me out of this situation. I could attack Murelia with it, then escape with Fran and the others during the confusion. I spent 5 EP to acquire it. Whatever happened, it was better than putting points into some spell with unknown effects.

Acquired Skill: Fiend Crusher

The PA's voice rang out as I felt the skill course through my body. Unfortunately, it was still pretty weak. I needed to make it stronger.

EP requirements to evolve Fiend Crusher met. Proceed?

Yes!

Level 5 Fiend Crusher was all I needed. That was a good investment.

Acquired Skill: Fiend Crusher Revelation. Fran has acquired the title: Fiend Annihilator

Fiend Crusher Revelation: Crushes and seals servants of the Evil One.

That was one loud pop-up! The explanation reminded me of Sword God's Blessing. Yes, this thing would *definitely* come in handy.

“What’s this odd sensation?” Murelia asked, frowning. “Is it coming from the sword...?”

Crap, she was on to me.

“And I can’t see your stats any more...”

She must have been using a Fiend Skill to scan me, and now my new skill was blocking it. It was now or never.

Fran! Mea! Quina! Lind! I’m going to attack her. Get ready to run!

I didn’t have time to wait for their response, but some warning was better than nothing. Before Murelia could pull away, I turned my blade upon her.

Uoooooooooh!

The moment I activated Fiend Crusher Revelation, my blade was covered in white light. Murelia screamed, stumbling back as though she was repulsed by it.

“Impossible! How are you not under my control?!”

The cat was really out of the bag now. I couldn’t let her get away!

While Murelia was still reeling, I launched myself at her with the full power of mana-propelled telekinesis.

Take this!

“Not so fast!”

Just as I was a few centimeters away, Murelia set up a barrier. Her reflexes were even sharper than I thought! I braced myself to bounce harmlessly off of it, but this time, I broke through with ease. There wasn’t even any resistance—it was like cutting through jelly. Before she could react, I plunged my blade deep into her chest.

Whoa!

“Gah!”

Even I was surprised at how easy it was. Despite her dainty appearance, her body was supposed to be reinforced with mana *and* Malice. Her skin should have been tougher than monster hide. No ordinary weapon could leave a scratch on her, and yet my blade was sticking out of her back.

Murelia’s expression contorted with pain, and the Malice in her body began to plummet. That must be the Fiend Seal doing its job.

This was my big chance. Fiend Crusher Revelation was more effective against her than I could ever have hoped! It was time to deal as much damage as I could.

Take this!

“Eeeergh! Damn you!”

I cast a Flame Spell, hoping to burn her from the inside, but unfortunately, my new skills didn’t seem to affect magic. The red-hot flames swirling around my blade were extinguished in a moment by her Malice. All I’d done was burn the entry wound. Nothing significant.

“H-how...were you...hiding this power? Aaaaaarg!”

Gah!

I yelled as Murelia grabbed my hilt and pulled me out of her body. Once she had hold of me, she beat my blade with her bare fist. I was still protected by the new skill, but it didn’t do much to reduce physical damage. I threw up a barrier to soften the blow, but it could only do so much. Another couple of punches, and my blade shattered.

“Cursed sword! Obey me!”

She was raging now, completely blinded by anger. And so she didn’t notice as I extended my decorative ribbon.

Obey you? No thanks!

“Gyaaaaa!”

I split my ribbon into countless needles and stabbed her in the back. The needles were weak individually, but every single one of them ignored her barrier and hit home. They were still affected by Fiend Crusher Revelation, and this skill was a bona fide Fiend-killer.

Murelia arched backward, screaming in pain as the needles pierced her body. Finally, her concentration slipped, and the dome over the battlefield melted away. Timespace Magic was back in play!

Time to get out of here!

I teleported back to Fran. She was still engaged in battle with Siegrune, but the Valkyrie was momentarily distracted by her master’s screams. We needed to leave.

“Teacher!”

I’m back, Fran. Come on, we need to run!

Chapter 3:

Black Lightning-Cloaked Old Cat

AS WE FLED the battlefield, I sensed a newcomer approaching. They must have been hidden by the dome. Had the enemy called for reinforcements? I didn't detect a shred of Malice from them, so that couldn't be it.

The figure accelerated toward the battlefield at a speed that rivaled Fran's Awakened form—leaving afterimages of black lightning behind them as they charged into the space between Mea and the second Valkyrie.

“Haaaa!”

“Where did you...?!” the Valkyrie stammered.

Whoever this newcomer was, they were too fast for even the combat-specialized Valkyrie to keep up with. Before she had time to react, they appeared behind her. She tried to turn and face them, but it was too late.

“Gah!”

A blade ran through her chest before she even knew who she was facing, piercing her right breast from behind.

“Uaaaaaargh!”

The blade sparked with black lightning, incinerating the Valkyrie's body from inside.

“Impossible...” Rossweisse murmured.

It was her last word.

“Hmph, how dull.”

“M-Master Kiara!” Mea stuttered. “What are you doing here?!”

She sounded as shocked as she was delighted. Kiara was supposed to be in the capital, but here she was, standing in the midst of the battle. Her face and stature were as manly as when we last saw her, but she had changed too. I might not have been a beastman, but even *I* noticed the difference.

It was her hair that stood out the most—her aging silver now had streaks of black running through it, like the stripes of a tiger. And she was basically coated in black lightning. It sparked in the very air around her.

Somehow, Kiara had managed to Evolve, the effect made more

striking by her white hair. No wonder they were called Black Tigers—but that wasn't what shocked me the most. A Black Tiger should have been wrapped in pale blue lightning, like Lumina was. But the lighting around Kiara was pitch black—the calling card of a Black Sky Tiger.

I quickly Identified her and found that her stats were vastly improved. Kiara was already as strong as an Evolved beastman *before* she Evolved herself, so it was terrifying to think how strong she must be now. Her Extra Skill, War God's Favor, pretty much multiplied her stat gain. Add in the Black Sky Tiger's Class Skill, Flashing Thunderclap, and her stat values became downright silly. She outclassed Fran now, even *with* my support.

Kiara grinned confidently as she skewered the Valkyrie.

"Sorry for interrupting your duel, Mea."

"M-Master...! You've...!"

"Hmph, let's just say I entertained myself with a little Fiend hunting!"

"You are all the help we need, Master! We need to aid the others!"

"Calm yourself, child. Do you really think I'd come alone?"

"What?"

Sure enough, she'd brought reinforcements aplenty.

"Allow me to assist you, Miss Quina."

"Mianoa."

Mia, Kiara's maid attendant dropped easily into Quina's fight against the Dullahan. I guess Mianoa was her full name.

"We'll employ 'that,' of course," said Quina.

"Ah, 'that.' Of course."

And so, a tag team of expressionless maids was formed.

Mianoa was a petite girl with fluffy pink curls and bottomless eyes, but after exchanging a few words with Quina, her form changed to something quite different.

"Awaken."

One of her arms grew larger and larger below the elbow, until it looked like she'd borrowed the arm of a giant. It was covered in gray arrowhead-shaped scales, and her fingernails turned into thick claws, but only her arm seemed affected. She must be one of the beast tribes whose features were emphasized on Awakening.

Apparently, Mianoa was a member of the Pangolin tribe. A Gray

Mountain Pangolin, to be exact. She had high Strength and Defense, and her Class Skill was Instant Strength Magnification. By the looks of it, she was specialized for physical combat.

“Proceeding.”

Mianoa charged straight toward the Dullahan to draw it out, acting as bait. While the Dullahan was preoccupied with her, Quina cast a Phantasm Spell and crept in behind it.

The rest of “that” played out as though they’d choreographed it. Quina twisted the Dullahan’s arms behind its back and kicked the back of its knee, forcing it to kneel. The Dullahan folded like a wooden mannequin. It might not feel pain, but it was still subject to the laws of biomechanics. Then Mianoa charged in at full speed and shoved her giant hand right through its body.

“Haaa!”

“...”

Her claws left a fist-sized hole in the Dullahan’s armor. The attack was so great that it basically shattered its crystal. Mianoa’s claws stopped just short of Quina’s chest but, faced with the death-dealing claw, the senior maid didn’t even flinch. A testament to just how much she trusted her junior.

Quina wasn’t much of a hard-hitter, but she was fast and an expert in disrupting her enemies. Meanwhile, Mianoa was slow, but could hit like a runaway drill. They made a great team.

“You caused a bit of blood splatter, Mianoa.”

“Come now, miss. A little blood is to be expected.”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps you’re getting sloppy.”

“I-I am *not* getting sloppy.”

Yep. Great team.

Meanwhile, a big man stepped onto the battlefield to assist Lind, and he looked strangely familiar. He was Awakened, and I could see his tough gray hide peeking through the gaps in his armor.

“Wave Blast!” he bellowed.

Wait. We’d seen that move before. Gaudartha, an A-Rank Adventurer, had used it against Fran in the fighting tournament. The Black Iron Rhino was a formidable opponent, and it seemed that his nephew Gwendartha had Evolved recently.

His strength was still nowhere near his uncle’s level, and I’m sorry to say that his Wave Blast was so weak that I doubted it was

even the same move, but I had to give him props for evolving since we left the capital. He must have undergone some pretty intense training. He uppercuted a Dullahan with his warhammer, and the impact combined with the Wave Blast to knock the monster straight up into the sky.

“Kuoooo!”

Once it was helplessly airborne, Lind incinerated the Dullahan with fire, then slammed it back into the ground with its tail. With the Dullahan battered and broken, Gwendartha piled on with his hammer.

“Raaaah!”

“Kuoooo!”

He smashed the undead creature’s armor with a warhammer art, weaving under Lind’s high-speed tail swipes.

“Tch! Just die already!”

“Kuoooo!”

The Dullahan struggled, but their attacks quickly finished it off. However, Gwendartha couldn’t have needed more than a single hit to kill it. It really underscored the difference in strength between him and Mianoa. Even now that he was Evolved, he was no match for the other combatants on the field.

“I win!”

“Kuoo!”

He might not be as strong as his uncle yet, but he had come a long way from the rhino who Fran had knocked out with a single blow.

And as for Fran’s reinforcements? It was someone we’d been waiting for all day.

“Grrrr!”

“Jet!!”

The direwolf had survived his mission to defeat the advanced units. He emerged from Fran’s shadow and clamped on to Siegrune’s ankle.

Fran didn’t bother to hide her delight. Both Jet and I were back at her side, and all was well in the world. Fran’s mood greatly affected her fighting, and the Valkyrie didn’t stand a chance against her now.

“A wolf?! Where did it...?”

“You’re done for.”

“Curses!”

Fran lunged forward, piercing the Valkyrie’s crystal. At least, she would have done, if Siegrune had not disappeared.

“I cannot afford to lose another servant.”

“I-I deeply apologize, Lady Murelia.”

Murelia had regrouped from the damage I’d dealt and teleported Siegrune to her side. Still, her Malice was pretty depleted. Guess it would take longer than that to recover from Fiend Crusher Revelation.

“Woof!”

“Welcome back, Jet.”

“Arf.”

Wherever Jet had been, he’d definitely been caught up in a fight. His whole body was covered with nasty wounds. Kiara and the others had probably fixed him up with some life potions, but it wasn’t enough to heal all of his scars. There was a deep gash down his right side that would have been fatal without their help. Patches of raw skin stood out through his fur, but the rest of his wounds were healing nicely. That one gash must have been pretty bad.

Hang on, buddy. Let me fix you up.

“Have some of this too, Jet.”

Between my healing and Fran’s life potions, Jet’s scars started to fade away, although he still wasn’t fully recovered. He was a lot less banged up than before, but there was at least one spot that refused to heal.

You look a lot cooler now, Jet.

“Hm. You look mean.”

“Woof!”

Something had tried to gouge out his left eye, and the scar it’d left behind made him look like something out of a yakuza movie. I mean, he looked fierce enough to make children cry *before*, now I suspected even adults would panic to get out of his way. The wound must have been caused by some kind of special attack, and it would need powerful spells and potions to heal completely.

By now, the others had defeated their own opponents and were starting to gather around Fran. Murelia glared at us with unabated fury. She must have finished fixing up Siegrune.

“You truly think I’d let you leave this place alive?”

Depleted or not, she was still full of Malice. I braced myself

against the force of her rage. There was no doubt how dangerous this woman was. Even Kiara's expression turned stiff.

"Looks like we've got a *real* monster on our hands."

Yet she still retained her will to fight.

"You won't leave here in one piece!" Murelia shouted, pouring out wave after wave of wrath.

I could feel it through Fiend Crusher Revelation. Even Kiara and Mea flinched away, but Gwendartha had it the worst.

"M-monster..."

His teeth chattered, but when he saw that everyone else was holding their ground, he stamped his foot and steadied himself.

"We have our Master on the field with us today!" he shouted. "And if that is not enough, we have two Reapers too... two Royal Maids, I mean. We *will* defeat you!"

Quina raised an eyebrow. "Reapers, you say?"

"I-I didn't mean it like that! I have nothing but respect for His Majesty's Finest! I swear!"

He shook his head enthusiastically to emphasize the point, deathly afraid of Quina.

Reapers? His Majesty's Finest? The Royal Maids were more famous—and more fearsome—than I thought. No wonder, I guess, if Quina was any indication of their strength.

"I was going to rip you all to shreds," Murelia went on. "But give me the sword, and I shall let you all go. Just this once."

"..."

Wow, she *really* had her sights on me! She probably wanted to study my powers so she could free herself from the dungeon. Acquiring me seemed even more important than her revenge.

This time, Fran's only answer was a stubborn glare.

"Hmph. Foolish girl."

Murelia frowned and gestured with her right hand. I felt something bounce off my blade.

"Hm?" Fran asked.

Yeah, she definitely just tried something weird.

"What...?! Get over here!"

She thrust her arm out again, but the result was exactly the same: a black glow formed around my blade for an instant, then

dissipated.

“What is this...?!”

She must be trying to pull me back to her hand, but Fiend Crusher Revelation was stopping her. She glared at me resentfully.

“Fine. I’ll just have to inspect you later.”

“Not happening,” said Fran.

“Oh, but it is. That sword is mine now. I’ve decided, you see?”

“I’ll never give him to you,” Fran said, tightening her grip on my hilt.

“Hmph, then I shall take it by force! Stand back, Siegrune!”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Now, prepare to die!”

Spheres of Malice poured from her outstretched arm, moving far too quickly to track, let alone evade. But Fran predicted their trajectory and used me to cut through every one of them. The spheres were powerful, but they didn’t leave so much as a single mark on my blade. Murelia was so furious that veins popped out all down her neck.

It was then that Kiara and the others made their move.

“Fire Javelin!”

“White Fire!”

“Kuooooo!”

“Grrr!”

Kiara must have been preparing that Fire Spell for a while. Maybe she hadn’t given it much thought, but the fact that she avoided Thunder Magic showed her natural combat instinct. Mea and Lind soon followed up with fire attacks of their own.

“Urgh!”

Murelia threw up a panicked barrier, then breathed a sigh of relief when the fire deflected harmlessly around it. Only then did she start laughing again, convinced that she had won.

“Ha ha ha! It’s no use!”

She must be having doubts about her ability to defend herself, after her Fiendmancy failed to affect me. Only when her barrier held did she begin to relax again, but Kiara had anticipated this defense. Her attack was a smokescreen from the beginning.

“Black Lightning Strike!”

In an instant, Kiara vanished and reappeared behind Murelia. She moved so fast, it looked like teleportation. Fran and I were probably the only ones that saw her move. The others just looked baffled, although Quina remained poker-faced as ever.

How did she do that? Her entire body was covered in black lightning...no, it looked like she'd *become* black lightning. Fran couldn't move that fast, not even with Flashing Thunderclap and every skill and spell at our disposal. And that incantation...Black Lightning Strike? Did it require the use of Flashing Thunderclap first, like Black Thunderfall? If so, then why couldn't Fran use it...?

Sure enough, Murelia had focused all of her attention on Fran and realized what Kiara was doing a second too late.

"Haa! Impact Slash!" Kiara shouted.

"Aargh! How dare you!"

Amazingly, Kiara's Fire Elemental Blade and Advanced Sword Art actually damaged Murelia. I guess sneak attacks were effective, no matter how strong your opponent was. Still, even Kiara's best efforts only scratched her. As the wound closed itself, Murelia started laughing again.

"Aha ha ha! I haven't seen that move in *ages*! To think that there would be three Black Sky Tigers on the battlefield today. That's more than even five hundred years ago!"

Kiara frowned. "So, you *are* one of us!"

"Of course, but I am so much more. A Black Sky Tiger *and* a servant of the Evil One. I have the power of both!"

"Yaaah!"

"Just die!"

If this were an ordinary sword fight, Fran's superior Sword Mastery would give us the edge, but Murelia had lifted off of the ground again, and Fran didn't have her natural ability for flight. For now, we were evenly matched.

Still, Murelia's movements were *much* duller than before. That Fiend Crusher skill must have sealed away some of her Malice and weakened her. Her attacks weren't as nimble as before either. This was our chance!

Raaah!

"Urgh!" Murelia grunted. "This again?!"

I split my ribbon into a host of needles and surrounded her. It forced her to stop attacking and start focusing on evasion. After all,

her barrier was useless against my attacks now. By instinct, she ignored Kiara and the others and focused on what she perceived as the real danger.

But were the others really no threat to her at all?

“Awfully rude of you to ignore me,” said Mea. “But thank you for giving me the room to breathe.”

Mea entered the fatal three-way. Mianoa had launched her through the air, and Quina had concealed her presence until she was right on top of Murelia, meaning only I had noticed her approach. Murelia had no time to dodge. She seemed to debate ignoring her for a moment, then switched to a defensive stance, just to be safe. Her Detection Skills probably warned her that Mea was a significant threat.

Of course, that didn’t mean we had to make it easy for her.

“Got you.”

“Woof!”

“Hurk! You little...!”

Defending against Mea’s attack left her open to Fran. When Jet attacked from the shadows, Murelia was completely thrown off guard. She vanished and reappeared some distance away.

Don’t let her escape!

“Persistent cretins, aren’t you?!”

We warped to Murelia’s side and pressed the offense. We couldn’t land a hit, but it didn’t matter. So long as we distracted her from Mea, that was all we needed.

“What?” Mea said. “Are you running away now, Murelia?”

Mea was no ordinary swordsman. She was a Golden Fire Lion who could control flames as though they were part of her body. She gathered the fire around her, although it felt different from the spell that burned down the monster horde. Mea held her ground and raised her hand, palm shining with light.

“Flare Cannon!”



A brilliant beam of gold-and-white fire shot out of her hand, like a laser from a sci-fi movie.

The beam was a combination of both white fire and golden fire. She'd used the Golden Flame of Annihilation to kill the Fiendified Valkyrie, but that was a melee-range ability. Flare Cannon could cover a *lot* more distance, and with Murelia too preoccupied to notice, she took the entire brunt of it.

“Eeeeyaaaah!”

Before she could throw up a barrier, the whole lower half of her body was blown away. She writhed in pain as everything from her stomach down disintegrated in the fire. Tough as she might be, even she couldn't shake off a full-power attack from Mea.

“D-damned lion! I'll tear you to pieces!”

Her flesh was already starting to reconstitute itself. A lethal mist of Malice swirled around Murelia, triggering my Danger Sense. And the mist somehow protected her, making it hard to get through and finish her off. Fran raised me up above her head.

“Teacher, I'm going in.”

Go on. I'm with you.

It was then that Fran and I started to emit a pale blue light. It was a gentle glow, and it had a calming effect on my mind. I could feel Fran breathing. Every sensation passed through her body into me.

I was no stranger to this strange state—we seemed to enter it every time we fought against a powerful enemy. And I was beginning to understand what triggered it too. It wasn't enough for our enemy to be powerful: they had to be prepared to die fighting against us, and Fran and I needed to be united in our intention to face them.

That's why it hadn't triggered when we fought the monster army earlier: Fran was too busy worrying about the safety of her tribe. Under those conditions, the blue light couldn't shine. But now? It was another matter.

Fran had overcome her fear of Murelia, and her will to fight was at its peak. She was set on defeating this powerful enemy and, in that, our intentions were united. That said, I still had no idea where this strange power was coming from.

“Huff...huff...”

Fran was too focused to notice it was happening. In the blue light, beads of sweat dripped down her chin. The moment seemed to stretch out forever. All of her being was focused down into one single strike.

“Sword King Arts: Skycutter.”

The most powerful physical attack in our repertoire. The mist of Malice around Murelia was no match for us. Right now, I was sure we could have cut through anything we wanted to.

“Y-you...!”

A pale blue slash dispelled the miasma, melting it away. Skycutter sliced Murelia open from her left shoulder to her right side. She made for a grotesque sight, with her blood and guts falling down onto the ground below. Especially since, unlike Mea’s Flare Cannon, these wounds were cauterized. Even so, Murelia somehow began to regenerate. But Kiara was right behind her.

“Don’t forget about me!”

“You bastards!”

Despite everything, Murelia managed to block Kiara’s Black Lightning Strike. Even so, the impact was more than enough to send her plummeting back down to earth. There was a loud crash as she sank deep into the ground.

Kiara had done it. She’d put Murelia on the ropes. But while Fran had me to heal her and Murelia had a seemingly endless supply of mana, Kiara couldn’t keep Flashing Thunderclap up for too long. It was taking its toll, and as she watched Murelia fall, her Awakened form fizzled out, and she started falling too.

Kiara’s in trouble!

“Hm!”

Fran hurried to her aid, but Kiara was having none of it.

“Never mind me! The battle! Focus on the battle!”

“...!”

She glared up at us as she fell, urging us to fight. Fran complied, turning to go after Murelia. Despite Kiara’s depleted mana pool, Fran trusted the old cat to handle herself. Now we just had to worry about Siegrune, standing between Fran and her injured master.

“Not a step closer!”

She was holding a Fiendstone spear, but somehow, she’d retained her rational mind. The only sign of its influence were her featureless, jet-black eyes, and her brutal, terrifying speed. She blocked Fran’s strikes expertly, and even managed to get in a few counterstrikes. She was stronger now too, and I suspected her Sense and Combat Skills had been boosted along with a general stats boost. Either way, there was no option of checking. I couldn’t Identify her

now that she was a Fiend.

Why isn't she going berserk?

"How...are you still sane?" Fran muttered.

"Ha ha ha! Unlike my worthless sister, I have the power of the gods coursing through my veins! The Valkyries were created to serve the God of Conflict. Our master's powers could never have an ill effect on us!"

The Valkyries were made back when the Evil One was still the God of Conflict. She might not be one of the originals, but someone in her ancestry must have been. She wasn't resistant to the Evil One's power: she had an *affinity* for it. Similar to the relationship between the Godbeast and the Ten Tribes.

"Haaa!"

"Yaaagh!"

However strong Siegrune was now, she was still no match for Fiend Crusher Revelation. Every time I clashed against her spear, her Malice drained away a little more. With the Fiend Seal, she would have less and less Malice available to her until she ran out. But she was still buying time for Murelia to recover.

We need to take her down!

"Hm! Jet!"

"Graaaaargh!"

"Let go of me, you damned wolf!"

Jet's jaws locked around Siegrune's ankle, holding her in place. She stumbled and thrashed, trying to escape.

"Tch!"

Jet might not be able to trip her, but at least she wasn't going anywhere. That gave us time enough to implement my real plan: to Transmogrify my ribbon into steel needles and attack her myself. I'd got the idea from Fran's battle against Phelms in the fighting tournament and his tidal wave of strings. I couldn't produce an attack on that scale, and the damage I dealt was far too low under normal circumstances, but it would be good enough. The attack was difficult to avoid, and we were up against Fiends—my new skill amplified the power of each needle exponentially.

Siegrune had expended all her energy to block Kanna Kamuy. She was easy pickings for Fran's Sword Arts and my omnidirectional needle assault.

"Impact Slash!"

Eat this!

“Gyaaaaaa!”

Fran destroyed the Fiendstone spear, and an instant later, the Valkyrie shattered into a million pieces as I skewered her with my needles.

And her crystal is weak too!

I thought she might have retained some of her crystal count, since the Fiendstone hadn’t driven her berserk, but we had no such luck. Worse yet, Murelia was done healing herself. She gnashed her teeth when she saw what we’d done to her underling.

“Now you’ve really done it!”

Fran, now’s our chance! She’s not back to full power yet!

“Hm!”

Fran launched another attack, but someone was running interference.

“Ooooooh!”

“Who...?”

A human...?

He was dressed like a knight and defending Murelia with a spear. He must have been concealing his presence before. Was he allied with her? The man had brown hair, white skin, and blue eyes—rather like a Western European from back home. The patch over his right eye made him stand out all the more. He would have looked quite handsome if it wasn’t for the monstrous yellow face emblazoned on that eyepatch.

“You will not have her!” he declared.

Time to find out who this guy was.

Name: Johann Magnolia

Age: 40

Race: Human

Class: Stealth Knight

Status: Contract

Level: 53/99

HP: 457; Magic: 209; Strength: 238; Agility: 192

Skills: Assassinate 6; Acting 5; Lie Detector 3; Stealth 6; Sense

Disruption 6; Royal Etiquette 2; Presence Sense 3; Bow Mastery 3; Sword Arts 7; Sword Mastery 8; Malice Resistance 7; Politeness 5; Shield Arts 3; Shield Mastery 6; Hush 3; Poison Resistance 5; Venomology 6; Paralysis Resistance 3; Water Magic 1; Rhetoric 5; Spirit Manipulation; Dull Pain

Unique Skill: Dangersight

Class Skill: Fiend Command 4

Titles: Murderer; Deputy Knight Commander of Bashar I

Equipment: Sword of Presence Concealment; Tenma Steel Shield; Quiet Mithril Full Plate; Deodorant Cloak; Bracelet of Silence; Ring of Charm Resistance; Eyepatch of Malice Disruption

He was quite powerful, although direct combat didn't appear to be his forte. He was much better equipped to fight from the shadows—the kind of assassin who kills you in your sleep. That must be why we couldn't detect him earlier.

And his title...Deputy Knight Commander of Basharl? I didn't understand exactly what that was, but it had to be important. Murelia herself said that she was cooperating with Basharl, so it was only natural that they sent reinforcements to aid her.

Johann clashed with Fran then jumped away, calling back to Murelia.

"Take this time. Regather your strength!"

Yep, they were on the same side all right. Although...she didn't exactly seem pleased to see him. If anything, she was confused, and even furious with him.

"What are you doing here, Johann?!"

"I am sorry. Our mission failed. Your forces were wiped out."

"Useless worm!"

Kiara, who'd recovered enough to sit up, stared at the knight.

"Is that...the one who was commanding the Fiends...?"

Jet poked his head out of the shadows. "Woof!"

Fran glanced back at them both. "You've seen him before?"

"Indeed. We were chasing a knight on our way here, but we lost him..."

Johann had commanded the Fiends to attack the Black Cats. Kiara and Jet might have saved them in time, but that didn't ease Fran's fury.

Careful, Fran! He managed to lose Kiara and Jet to get back here.

“I know.”

I opened my senses up to look for anyone else. Were there other knights in the vicinity? I couldn't sense anyone.

“Swiftly, Murelia,” said Johann. “Heal yourself! The House of Magnolia still has need of you to fulfill our great hope!”

“Protect me then,” she said. “For Romeo's sake!”

“Of course!”

They may trust each other, but I couldn't say that they were friendly. Murelia looked at Johann with resentment, and he didn't look too pleased to see her either. All the same, they seemed to have some kind of agreement.

Sure enough, Murelia fell back, letting Johann shield her while she concentrated. Was she still trying to heal herself?

“Out of my way!” Fran growled.

“You shall not lay a hand on her!”

Somehow, this guy managed to keep up with Fran. She tried to break through his defense from the side, but he anticipated it and brought his shield up. Despite his lack of ability, he was willing to be a human shield for Murelia. It must be down to his unique skill, Dangersight. I didn't know how it worked, but it was probably a Sight Skill that allowed you to see any misfortunate heading for you or your allies. Kind of like a Danger Sense for the eyes.

“Haaa!”

Eat this!

But seeing an attack didn't mean you could defend against it. I added Wind and Fire Spells to Fran's Advanced Sword Arts and we threw it all at Johann. But still he managed to block it—using a Shield Art against her strike, scattering the Wind Spell with his blade, and dodging away from the Fire Spell, avoiding it by a hair's breadth. This Dangersight really was something!

Nevertheless, Fran pushed him back. In the end, she was far stronger. I bore down on him with Telekinesis. I wasn't trying to deal damage; I just wanted to break his stance.

“Urgh, I can't evade it!”

He saw this coming too. Johann dug his heels into the ground and braced with his shield, and I gouged at him with Telekinesis.

Now's your chance, Fran!

“Hm!”

Fran tapped me, and the sudden change of inertia broke Johann’s footing. He tripped sideways, and we let him fall. After all, we had our sights set on Murelia. But suddenly, we were interrupted.

“Air Slicer!”

Twenty wind sickles swirled toward Fran. Each of them was quite powerful in its own right, and Fran dodged out of their way while we searched for the source of the spell. There he was! The caster had appeared behind Murelia, accompanied by armor-clad Fiends and human knights.

Where had they been hiding? I’d scanned the area when Johann showed up! They must be using some kind of skill.

“Protect the Fiend!” cried the newcomer.

“You’re here too?!” Johann called out.

“Ha ha ha, of course! After all, we still have need of the Fiend Princess. Now, Master Johann, fall back!”

A quick Identify named the man as Sunhawk Goldy. A forty-three-year-old Storm Knight. His swordsmanship was weaker than Johann’s, but he possessed Storm Magic 4 and Speedcast 6, making him a well-balanced warrior. He also had Group Conceal. That must be what he used to keep his unit hidden! No wonder he escaped from Kiara and Jet.

Goldy narrowed his eyes at Fran and began another incantation. It looked like he was prepared to take a bullet for Murelia too. As were all the Fiends he’d brought with him.

“Fiend!” Goldy called back to Murelia. “Now is your chance. Heal yourself!”

“You don’t have to keep telling me that!”

Looks like they weren’t on friendly terms either. They were united by a common cause and nothing more.

“I’m coming, Fran!” shouted Gwendartha.

“Woof woof!”

“Come, Mianoa,” said Quina. “Let’s lend them our aid.”

“Yes!”

Our reinforcements rushed toward Goldy and his unit, while Mea stayed back to protect Kiara, who was still on the ground. Quina and the others might not be strong enough to deal with Murelia, but they overwhelmed the Fiends and knights with ease.

“Stop them!” shouted Goldy. “Kill those animals!”

“Gya gya!”

The two forces clashed, and the fight began. Jet returned to his original size, tearing into armor and flesh with his teeth and spoiling shields with his claws. A single swipe of his tail was enough to send several of his enemies flying. Jet was a specialist at stealth, but he wasn't too shabby in direct combat either. His attacks were painfully deliberate, to the point of attracting Murelia's attention, and that was all we needed to get closer to her.

We hadn't rehearsed the plan, but Fran and Jet had fought together for long enough that she understood what he was doing. Taking advantage of the opening, Fran concealed her presence and melded into the shadows. Every moment like this was worth its weight in gold. Fran slipped through the Fiends easily. Goldy eventually realized that something had gotten past them, but by then, it was too late. Murelia was right in front of us.

Got you!

We were so sure we had her this time. Fran lunged forward to stab her in the back, but somehow, Johann managed to get between us. His Dangersight must have warned him that Murelia was in danger.

“Gah!”

“So persistent!”

We'd been aiming for Murelia's chest, but my blade lodged in Johann's body instead. But we couldn't give up now.

“Taaaah!”

Come on!

Fran slammed forward, trying to drive me through Johann and into Murelia.

“I won't let you!”

“Master Johann!” Goldy shouted. “Fall back!”

But Johann took no notice.

“Ngaaaaaaah!”

Despite the sword running through his chest, he stepped forward—grasping the edge of my blade and sacrificing his hand as well as his body to stop Fran from pressing forward.

“Don't...mind me...” he rasped. “Kill her!”

Goldy and his underlings immediately responded. How were

these guys so honorable?!

Tch!

We needed to get out of here. I teleported us away, leaving Johann to take the brunt of his allies' attacks. He sank to the ground in a pool of his own blood. We hadn't managed to kill Murelia, but at least her defender was dead. Now we just needed another opportunity to get to her. Fran tightened her grip on my hilt, but before she could act, an attack came from an unlikely source.

"Gaaaargh!"

Gwendartha was Malice Drunk and turning on his allies. He must have been injured fighting all those Fiends. He was frothing at the mouth, completely out of his mind, and emitting so much Malice he almost looked Undead himself.

"Aha ha ha!" Murelia gloated. "I may not be able to control your sword, but I still have power over those who serve the Evil One!"

She had done something to Gwendartha. But why hadn't she picked someone stronger? Perhaps the stronger ones were harder to control. That was fine by me—even buffed by Malice, Gwendartha was still weak. Quina was holding the giant off easily enough. Fran didn't even have to do anything.

"You're already so drunk with Malice that you've lost your mind? Tch, you're such a lightweight."

"Do you need some help, Miss Quina? It looks like you're struggling there."

"Did you say something, Mia?"

"No. Nothing at all."

The two maids were still chatting away, even in the heat of battle. They really were His Majesty's Finest.

Murelia scowled to see her latest minion restrained.

"You useless blockhead! In that case...huh?!"

Before she could finish, Murelia turned around, looking north.

"What the hell are you saying?! An intruder?"

There was no one there. She was yelling at nothing.

"Wait! No, I need to stay here...! Damn it all!"

It looked like she was arguing with someone. She turned back to what was left of her forces.

"Withdraw," she said. "We have to fall back."

“What?!” said Goldy. “What are you doing?!”

Was she defecting? He seemed completely floored by what she was saying.

“I can’t help it!” Murelia growled. “I have to obey that bastard’s orders!”

She screamed in frustration, raising her hand toward Goldy and the remains of his unit.

“Still, I may yet get some good out of you.”

She flicked her hand, summoning Johann’s eye patch to her the same way she’d pulled me away from Fran. Blood poured Johann’s right eye socket and was slowly replaced by an ominous black glow.

“Gugoga...”

There was a pitch-black stone where his eye should have been. The patch had held back its power. Now it was gone, a black glow engulfed his whole body.

Fran, you have to stop him!

“Hm!”

As we lunged for him, Goldy called out to Murelia.

“May I leave Master Romeo in your hands?”

“Of course. He is the one thing you may trust me with.”

More black light seeped out of Murelia’s hand, transforming Johann and the other Basharlians right before our eyes. Their skin turned ash gray, and muscles bulged all over their bodies. Finally, the light of reason went out in their eyes.

“Gaaaaaargh!”

“Goooooorgh!”

As they were corrupted, their stats rose greatly. A moment later, they turned on Quina and the others. We wouldn’t be taking them down with one hit anymore.

This is bad!

“Hm!”

Quina, Mianoa, and Jet could take care of themselves, but Mea was exhausted, Kiara was still down, and Gwendartha was out cold! We had to keep these Fiends in check to protect them, but that was exactly what Murelia wanted.

Fran, she’s getting away!

“Hm!”

We couldn't let her escape! Fran kicked Gwendartha, sending him hurtling a good twenty meters through the crowd of Fiends. His armor dented where she'd kicked him and he started coughing up blood, but it was better than dying. Mea kept an eye on his landing point, leaving us free to teleport to Murelia's side.

As soon as we were there, Fran unleashed a Sword Art.

"Haaa! Triple Thrust!"

"Aaaaaaargh!"

Fran lopped off her arm, but it barely broke Murelia's concentration.

"This isn't over!" Murelia growled. "Next time we meet, we'll settle this!"

"Hrmph!"

Tch. She teleported.

I couldn't even feel her presence anymore. She was long gone.

"Where did she go...?"

I don't know. I'd love to find out, but we have a knight situation to handle.

"Right..."

If we couldn't catch Murelia herself, then we needed to get information about her. That meant we needed to restrain some of these knights and find a way to make them talk. The corruption might have made them stronger, but sacrificing their sanity made them predictable. Jet and Quina were already making light work of them.

"Take this!"

Only one of them had managed to retain his wits. Somehow, Johann wasn't just fully healed—he was standing upright. Was it because of the strength of his will? Maybe it was thanks to his Malice Resistance and Fiend Command Skills. The Fiendstone in his right eye made him more powerful without robbing him of his mind. With it, he could command both his own knights *and* the Fiends.

Quina realized it right away. Having identified him as the most dangerous enemy on the field, and the one most likely to have the information we wanted, she knew we needed to keep him alive. Despite his new power, he was still far outclassed, and Jet soon knocked him out with a swipe.

In the meantime, I handled the remaining knights.

"Guaaaaa!"

“Raaaaah!”

“Shut up.”

We paralyzed them, broke their legs, and tied them up but, even so, they didn’t return to their senses. They just kept flailing about like madmen.

“...”

Meanwhile, Johann was silent as a corpse. He was definitely going to be the toughest nut to crack. His eyes were full of defiance, determined not to tell us a single thing.

“Waaagh!”

“And what do we do about him?”

Gwendartha was still Malice Drunk and flailing about with the others. Normally, it would go away with time, but this Malice had come from Murelia. Who knew when it would wear off?

“I’d like to bring him back to his senses, but how do we do that?”

“Slapping him didn’t work...”

Mea had recovered from her exhaustion and was talking to Mianoa, who’d taken over caring for Kiara. I tried using some cleansing spells on Gwendartha, but they weren’t powerful enough to have any effect. Maybe Fiend Crusher Revelation would be useful.

Shall I cut him? Fran asked.

Let’s not. For now, at least.

Hm.

Just touch him with the flat of my blade.

All right.

I hoped it would provide some relief, at least. I was no longer glowing with blue light, but that wasn’t related to Fiend Crusher Revelation anyway. I activated the skill as Fran stepped forward. Ultimately, the effects were far more powerful than I could ever have imagined.

“Gyaaaaaaa!”

Whoa!

Gwendartha screamed so loudly that it made me jump. A white light poured out of his bound body, dispersing the black miasma of Malice. He fell unconscious again immediately. The screaming worried me a little, but he was unharmed, and the Malice had completely gone.

“What did you do to him?” Mea asked.

“Drove out the Malice.”

Mea frowned, not knowing what was going on. To an observer, it looked like Gwendartha had lost consciousness after Fran touched him with her sword. No wonder Mea was worried.

She sat him up, tapping him on the cheek.

“Hey, are you still with us? You all right?”

“Hunh... where...?”

Before long, he had recovered and was answering Mea’s questions. He remembered everything up to the point where he got hit by a ball of Malice. This was good news. If I could cleanse him, that meant I could try it on the Basharian knights.

“Here.”

“Gaaaaaargh!”

The Fiendstone in Johann’s right eye shattered as soon as I touched it and, just like that, his Malice was gone. If it worked with Johann, it should work with the rest of his men. We went to work purifying the others, although the screaming didn’t get any less unnerving.

“Higyaaaaa!”

“Hroooogh!”

“Wh-what is happening...?!” Gwendartha stammered.

He’d only just come around, and now everyone around him sounded as though they were being tortured. He didn’t know what Fran was doing, but he didn’t try to stop her. I guess he trusted her to do the right thing, either way.

Five minutes later, the five knights had completely regained their senses. Even Johann was completely purified. Of course, I didn’t have any right to brag about it, seeing as I hadn’t done anything. If anything, Fran was the one who administered the healing touch. I had no idea what had happened after that.

This Fiend Crusher Skill really was powerful. I didn’t think that it could drain Malice from someone who was already practically Fiendified. It was really going to be useful.

For now, however, we had interrogations to carry out.

“Now then,” said Mea. “Things will be a lot less painful if you tell us what we want to know.”

“...”

The knights glared at her in silence. The Malice might have left their bodies, but their hatred of beastmen remained.

“I know you’re working for Basharl,” Mea said. “What’s your relation to the Fiend named Murelia?”

“...”

“What is your purpose here?”

“...”

Nothing. Not so much as a single word. Damn, how could we crack these guys?!

“Very well, then,” said Mea. “We have other ways of making you talk. Quina?”

“Right away.”

They started asking questions again, then moved to threats, then torture, then healing, then questions again. And around and around we went, yet none of the knights said a single word. Mea tried to bribe them with offers of amnesty, threatened to harm their friends, and even tortured them brutally, but the light in the knights’ eyes refused to go out. They may be our enemies, but that was pretty admirable.

“Last chance,” said Mea. “What is your relation to Murelia?”

“...”

But the knight only groaned as Quina slowly and deliberately broke each of his fingers.

“Ah, I see their will is genuine,” said Mea. “Torture won’t be enough to break them.”

“So it would seem,” Quina agreed, releasing the man’s mangled hand.

“I suppose it can’t be helped. Take care of it, Quina.”

“Very well.”

“What are you doing?” Fran asked.

“Quina is going to use her ace in the hole.”

“Ace in the hole?”

“Just watch. You’ll see soon enough.”

Quina took up her place in front of the knights and Awakened. Johann had been close to death a few minutes ago, but it was nothing my healing spells couldn’t fix. Still, I hadn’t healed him completely—which turned out to be for the best.

“The skill works better the weaker they are,” said Quina.

As we watched, she activated her Class Skill, Phantasm. As well as creating an illusion, it also had hypnotic effects. These weren't very strong, but if the subject was weakened and Quina charged it with mana, she would have them in her grasp.

"Now," she said. "Look into my eyes."

"Urk."

Johann struggled, turning his gaze away.

"Just kidding," said Quina. "The illusion has nothing to do with my eyes, but thanks for getting distracted. That's all I needed to get in."

Mana poured out of her body, and Johann's eyes glassed over.

"Aaannd...there we go. Now, what is your name?"

"Johann Magnolia."

"Age?"

"Forty."

"Good." She turned to Mea. "I'm in."

Johann was hypnotized, but this state wouldn't last forever. We had to work fast.

"What is your aff—"

"Master Johann, snap out of it!" shouted one of the knights.

"What did you do to the Deputy Commander, you filthy animal?!"

They knew Quina had put him under a spell of some kind and started yelling in the hopes of breaking her concentration.

"Quiet," said Fran, silencing them all with a Wind Spell.

"..."

They moved their lips, but not a single sound came out. Now we could get down to business.

"As I was saying," said Quina. "What is your affiliation?"

"The Kingdom of Basharl."

"What is your relation to Murelia?"

"Murelia played a crucial part in the founding of House Magnolia. And she has assisted us greatly with our grand plan."

"Let's start there. Tell me everything you know about her."

And with that, he started to talk. He began with the Magnolia family's version of what happened five hundred years ago, when

Murelia was a renowned adventurer. She was a princess, and a little haughty, but nothing like the depraved monster we'd fought today. Rather, she was distressed by the prevailing anti-human views of the day and wanted to do what she could to alleviate human persecution.

As an adventurer, she didn't have much influence, but she did manage to form a party with humans to improve their standing a little. That was when she fell in love with a human member of her party. At the time, humans were considered lower than slaves. The fact that their own princess was in a relationship with one caused quite the scandal. Still, Murelia persevered, determined to change the hearts of those around her. That's when she returned to the royal palace to curry favor and make herself heard.

When she got there, the whole court shunned her. She was disgraced for falling in love with a human. The most heartless among them called her a fool and a whore, and not a single beastman stood by her.

As punishment, she and her lover were separated, but then things got even worse. They gave her lover a slave girl and forced him to have a child with her, threatening to kill Murelia if he didn't comply.

Murelia was already angry at the beastmen for discriminating against humans. Having her lover taken from her made her resentment deepen. After that, she lost all faith in the world, and her rage knew no bounds.

That was when the Evil One entered the picture.

The royal family told her that, if she broke the Evil One's seal and used its power for the good of the kingdom, they would give her lover back to her. Her father led her to where the Evil One was sealed and presented her as a sacrifice, but the Evil One had been sleeping for millennia, and could not be roused so easily. Instead, the Evil One gave his powers to Murelia and ordered her to collect souls for him.

Her latent talent for Fiendmancy prevented the Evil One's powers from breaking her mind, and so Murelia began her work: attempting to revive the Evil One and taking her revenge on the beastmen. Her first order of business was to take over the royal family. It was easy enough. The Evil One's powers gave her control over them.

With the powerful Black Cat tribe under her sway, she sought out the beastman supremacists and crushed them—both reaping her revenge and gathering sacrifices for the Evil One in a single stroke.

But even then, the anti-humanists persisted. If anything, they

grew more vengeful now that they saw the humans were under Murelia's protection. They considered her lover to be the source of Murelia's insanity, and so their assassins made him their target. After several attempts on his life, Murelia finally sent him to safety in the neighboring country of Basharl, the Beastfolk's favorite punching bag.

The kindhearted Basharlian king agreed to give him shelter. When the beastmen supremacists attacked, Murelia and the Basharlian forces held back the invading force and were victorious.

Then, just as it seemed as though Murelia would get the happy ending she craved, tragedy struck once again. Before she had the chance to live with her lover in peace, the gods exacted retribution on all who had collaborated with the Evil One, and Murelia perished.

Still, her lover survived and continued to live in Basharl, together with the child he had fathered with the slave girl. And that was how the House of Magnolia was founded.

Mea frowned. "I have never heard this tale before."

If it was to be believed, then Murelia was still a villain set on reviving the Evil One, but things had not always been that way. However, the story seemed too flattering to Murelia and Basharl, and too critical of the Beastman Nation. I guess that's just how history worked. After all, the version of the story told in the Beastman Nation painted *them* as the heroes, didn't it? I guess generations of whitewashing in Basharl would make them seem like the good guys.

Only Murelia knew the whole truth, and Mea seemed to realize this.

"Is she working with Basharl?" she asked.

"Her master, the Fiendmancer Linford, tempted our king with his magic. A spell to amplify greed, I suspect. Murelia is the army our king dispatched into the Beastman Nation."

I'd thought the king was crazy for willingly cooperating with Fiends. If his judgment was clouded by Fiendmancy, that explained things. I guess the Basharlian king considered a lone Fiendmancer to be more trustworthy than the Beastman Nation. Besides, Basharlian legend had it that one of their kings cooperated with Murelia in the past, so Linford likely found it easy to convince Basharl to fight with them.

"But to work with Fiends, even so..." Mea muttered.

Johann responded to Mea's private musings. "Better Fiends than animals. The current invasion of the Beastman Nation is about more than just winning territories."

“What do you mean?”

“The Basharlian military is depleted. Without Murelia’s help, we could not have won a simple skirmish.”

That might give the appearance of peace, but beneath the surface, anti-beastman extremists had gone underground, backed by most of the nobility and forming a number of secret societies. These groups moved in the shadows, spreading bad sentiment wherever they went. It was only a matter of time before these sentiments exploded into rioting and civil war. However, venting their frustrations by sending troops to fight the Beastman Nation was as good as sending them to their graves.

Of course, the current Beast King was a moderate, but he was still a beastman. Most Basharlians simply wouldn’t believe him. With all of that considered, Linford provided the perfect solution: a way to win the war and bring their long-standing national tragedy to an end. Even if they lost, the king could send the anti-beastman extremists to their deaths on the front lines. With such a juicy proposition on the table, a little bit of Fiendmancy was more than enough to cloud the king’s judgment.

“Murelia has the strength of a whole army,” said Johann. “And Linford has his dungeon. At least we have the chance of victory.”

Even if they were defeated, they could simply claim that they were controlled by the Evil One. If anything, they could blame Murelia, and blame the beastmen for not keeping their kind in check. The Krishna family could use that as a way of avenging themselves against the usurper, Narasimhas, and an external force could use the Beastman Nation’s bickering to their own benefit.

And they were prepared for the worst. Even if they lost the war, they had another plan.

“To revive a piece of the Evil One...?”

“Yes. If our invasion fails and the Beastman Nation retaliates, we still have our last resort.”

They were prepared to unleash the Evil One’s power and lay waste to everything. Once the Beastman Nation was destroyed, Basharl would stand unopposed. It was a terrible choice, but I guess Linford’s Fiendmancy had blinded the king to that.

All of this sounded bad. Murelia could be reviving the Evil One right now, while we stood around worrying about enemies coming from the north.

“That’s why you helped her escape!” said Mea. “So she can

revive the Evil One!”

She sounded mortified. An enemy was infiltrating her beloved country, planning to awaken an ancient evil, and that enemy was immensely powerful in one-on-one combat. No wonder she was uneasy.

But Johann shook his head. “No. We do not wish for such madness.”

What? Didn’t he just say that Basharl wanted to use a piece of the Evil One to obliterate the beastmen? Did Johann have plans of his own?

“Then why did you let her go?” Mea asked. “I thought Murelia was key to destroying my country.”

“I don’t care what happens to your country,” said Johann. “I’m doing this for my son. So that the great hope of House Magnolia may be fulfilled. That is why I need Murelia.”

“Great hope? You said that earlier. What is that?”

“To escape from the Kingdom of Basharl.”

Was his house more important than his country?

“Escape? I thought you were working for Basharl.”

“No,” said Johann. “They are using us. The Magnolia bloodline has a special power: it allows us to resist Malice, and to manipulate it. The Basharlians have used us since time immemorial because of it. My ancestor, Murelia’s lover, bound himself to the Basharlians with blood. But my son is not yet bound by this contract. We have gone to great pains to avoid marking his flesh with that contract.”

So his family couldn’t leave because of some kind of a slave contract they had with the country? Considering we were standing on beastman grounds, there must have been some leeway. I guess he was planning to ship his son out of Basharl somehow.

“How is Murelia involved in that?” Mea asked.

“My son, Romeo, has powers that rival those of our ancestors. He is a throwback to the old days, and the king has taken great interest. He wishes to use Romeo to revive the piece of the Evil One. But that is the same as signing my son’s death warrant! The only way to stop it is to destroy the Beastman Nation *without* relying on the Evil One’s powers.”

“That still doesn’t explain what Murelia has to do with it!”

Murelia was the Evil One’s servant. Reviving him would be the

fastest way to take revenge on the Beastman Nation.

“She needs Magnolian blood for a ritual to release herself from Linford’s bondage. That is the reason behind our blood pact. We will give her the blood of our house in exchange for smuggling Romeo away after destroying the Beastman Nation.”

“I see,” said Mea. “But...do you really think you can bind such a Fiend with mages? She is going to betray you.”

“And what else would you have me do? This is our only choice! If the invasion of the Beastman Nation fails, my house is done for. They will use my son to awaken the Evil One, and they will blame the failure of the campaign on us. They will say that *we* were the ones who made a deal with Murelia! After all, we have the power to control Malice. If the Beast King were to catch wind of this, we would be treated as enemies of humanity. Our land would be parceled off and given to filthy animals. Whoever wins, we lose. Murelia is our only hope!”

Even under hypnosis, he was starting to shout.

“Better a Fiend than a king that treats us like tools, or animals intent on our complete destruction!”

Quina grimaced with strain. “He will break free if he keeps getting agitated like this. Be quick.”

“R-right,” Mea stammered. “Where did Murelia disappear to?”

“She has been recalled to the dungeon by its master.”

“I see.”

Soon, we had the location of the dungeon and a description of the forces under Murelia’s command. The entrance to the dungeon was located on the Basharlian side of the mountains and was large enough to facilitate the movement of monsters and Fiends. It looked like the mouth of a cave, but inside it was more like a fort, complete with traps and the like. Apparently, the dungeon master used to be a human and was one of Linford’s men, but he was not very dangerous in himself.

Johann didn’t know the details of what was inside, so Quina set about hypnotizing and interrogating the others. Unfortunately, they knew little more than Johann. The only useful piece of information we got was that Goldy and the others were vassals of House Magnolia and had served them for a long time.

“So,” Mea said. “I suppose we go to the dungeon.”

Kiara nodded. “Sounds fun.”

She was finally back on her feet and looking forward to the adventure.

“Madam Kiara,” said Mianoa. “You have not yet fully recovered. You must take care of yourself.”

Kiara snorted. “And leave Murelia to do whatever she wishes? No. Especially not when she is about to call reinforcements. We *must* go.”

“That is true...” said Mea, looking worried.

“We are up against a dungeon sub-master, are we not?” Kiara asked. “In that case, we may destroy the dungeon core if things get hairy and take out its master in the process.”

“That is easier said than done.”

“And yet,” said Kiara, “it is our only course of action. It’s one old cat for the sake of the whole Beastman Nation. If you ask me, that’s a pretty good deal.”

Mea straightened at the sound of determination in Kiara’s voice.

“Very well.”

The old cat laughed. “Don’t you worry about me. You know I am always looking for an excuse to fight.”

Despite her relaxed attitude, she knew that Mea was serious and was giving Kiara her blessing as the princess.

The only one lacking in enthusiasm was Gwendartha.

“Why the long face, Gwen?” Kiara asked, glaring at him.

It looked like he almost felt sorry for Murelia.

“Master,” he said. “From what they told us...”

“Fool! Do you seriously sympathize with them?” Kiara demanded. “We do not even know if the story is true! And besides, if you were a true warrior, you would rejoice.”

“O-over what?” he asked.

“We are to face an enemy of legend,” said Kiara. “And we shall have to fight her sooner or later. It is better to do so without doubts.”

Gwendartha sighed with exasperation. “You are the only one who feels that way, Master.”

“You agree with me, don’t you?” Kiara asked the others. “Mea? Fran?”

“It’s always more entertaining to fight a strong enemy than a weak one.”

“Hm.”

Fran and Mea nodded in agreement. The blood knights really did have a one-track mind. Still, I couldn't argue with them. Whatever had happened in the past, Murelia had declared herself Fran's enemy. We had no choice but to defeat her. But Gwendartha was young and naïve, and he still didn't look convinced.

“Oh, grow up!” Kiara chided. “They've single-handedly thrown the Beastman Nation into its greatest crisis to date. You *do* realize that, don't you?”

“Y-yes...”

But he still looked unsure. He was going to have to do a lot of growing up, and that was going to take time.

“We are going after Murelia,” said Kiara.

“Yes, master,” Gwendartha conceded.

Johann and his knights were all tied up and knocked out, and a number of adventurers from Green Goat had traveled with Gwendartha most of the way, so we contacted them via manaphone to tell them to come and collect the prisoners.

“But how will we reach the dungeon?” Mea asked. “Lind cannot carry us all.”

Mea rested her chin on her fingers. Reaching the other side of the mountains on foot would take too long. Even with Kiara and Mea fully recovered, sprinting there would leave them exhausted all over again.

Could we split the party, riding Jet and Lind? It seemed doubtful. Jet was still pretty out of it, and I wanted to let him rest if we could. A cart would be the best option, but there were no cart stations nearby.

“Heh,” Quina chuckled. “I had a feeling this would happen.”

“What?” Mea asked. “Out with it!”

Quina ignored her complaints and pulled a whole horse-drawn carriage out from under her skirt. The carriage even had a canopy, and the horses appeared to be made from stone.

“One golem carriage,” said Quina. “It fits six people and moves as quiet as a whisper.”

“That is excellent, Miss Quina,” Mianoa praised. “And the delivery of that line was perfect!”

“Such are a maid's manners.”

Even I could tell that Quina looked smug now. Jet and Gwendartha were especially shocked to see the carriage appear out of nowhere. The direwolf's jaw was basically on the ground. It was rather comical.

However, Mea and Kiara were completely unfazed. To them, it was just part of Quina's job. They wasted no time on shock and climbed swiftly into the carriage.

You don't look surprised either, Fran.

It's basically Pocket Dimension.

I guess, if you put it that way...

Still, the theatrics were on a whole other level.

"Will we all fit inside?" Mea asked. "Master Kiara..."

"I am going."

"I know, I know," Mea said. "Quina, Mianoa, and Fran are coming too, so...Gwendartha, perhaps you should stay here and look after the knights?"

It was a good idea. If he came along, he'd only end up being controlled by Murelia again. It made sense to send an elite fighting force after her and ask Gwendartha to stay here. He could hand the prisoners over to the incoming adventurers.

Gwendartha was in a difficult spot. His stamina and defense made him a decent shield, but his doubts would get in our way. It could even get him killed. No, it would be better for everyone if he stayed behind. But surprisingly, Gwendartha refused.

"W-wait, I'm coming with you."

Kiara frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Of course."

"You know we can't protect you," Kiara said, sending out waves of intimidation. "If you end up as a deadweight, you're on your own."

Gwendartha stood his ground and nodded. "I understand."

"All right, then," said Kiara. "Come along."

"Are you sure about this?" Mea asked.

Kiara shrugged. "It would take too long to talk him out of it. We may as well bring him along. We could always use him as a meat shield."

"Yes!" Gwendartha agreed. "I will take point!"

"Fool!" Kiara growled. "No one would use such a flimsy shield as

you!”

“But you just said...”

“Silence. It was a figure of speech. If you come with us, you are making your own bed. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

And so we began our journey to Murelia’s dungeon. We were a formidable team, but who knew what awaited us there...

Chapter 4: Accursed Berserker

THE TRIP NORTH was bumpier than I'd expected. But then, the roads here weren't paved, and the golem cart had no suspension, so I guess it was to be expected. Did the people of this world really consider a trip like this to be "whisper smooth"? They must, because Gwendartha was clearly impressed by the royal carriage. Apparently, it was equipped with shock-absorbing manatech. Thinking about it, *all* the carriages we'd been in were at least as bumpy as this, even the ones traveling on actual roads. That made the golem carriage the height of transportation.

You doing okay, Fran?

"Hm...I'm fine..." she murmured.

But she was clearly feeling worse for wear. It wasn't that she was carsick. If anything, the bumping of the carriage was like a rocking cradle for her. She was quickly falling asleep.

Her eyelids fluttered as she struggled to stay awake. She'd been fighting all night and hadn't caught a wink of sleep, and while the road wasn't regular enough to be rhythmic, the rocking motion was more than enough to make her sleepy.

Fran always kept to a regular sleep schedule. In fact, she probably slept better than most people. But the all-nighter was hell on her nerves, especially since she had spent it fighting for her own life and the lives of her friends. She rubbed her eyes, trying her best to stay awake.

You can sleep if you want to.

"Hm..."

In fact, it would be better if she did, but Fran kept fighting against it.

What is it?

"Wanna talk...to Kiara..." she muttered.

She looked at the older cat with sleepy eyes. She really wanted to spend the rest of the journey talking to her.

"We can talk later, Fran," said Kiara. "You should get some rest."

"Hrm...but..."

"Resting is part of a warrior's role."

“Okay...” Fran nodded. “Zzz...”

“Aaaaand she’s gone,” Kiara said.

“Th-that was fast!” Gwendartha said. He was probably too nervous to sleep. As a neurotic in my former life, I sympathized. “Looking at how serene she is, it’s hard to believe she fights like a tiger.”

Kiara nodded. “She is strong, but she is still a child.”

Fran laid her head on Kiara’s lap, and the old cat stroked her head gently while Fran smiled in her sleep. They really did look like grandmother and granddaughter, but Kiara tensed up suddenly.

“Hrm.”

In an instant, everyone was ready, expecting an ambush. But Kiara just smiled.

“Calm down. Fran is just drooling.”

“What?! Master, don’t scare us like that!”

Kiara chuckled warmly. “It’s been decades since I had a child drool on me.”

“I just can’t believe that we’ve found someone reckless enough to use your lap as a pillow, Master Kiara,” said Mea.

“Well, you may join her, if you wish.”

“I...shall pass on that, thank you.”

“Hmph, suit yourself. Anyway, all of you should get some rest, too. I’ll keep watch.”

“You must be as tired as we are, master,” Mea protested.

“You know how we old people are,” she said. “The older we get, the less sleep we need.”

“Even so,” Mea said. “You should rest. Quina’s race only requires minimal sleep. She can keep watch while she’s driving.”

I guess the Tapir tribe’s sleep-related abilities weren’t limited to sending others to dreamland. But would Quina really be all right? I should probably check in on her.

Quina, do you want me to make a humanoid copy of myself to drive for you? I asked telepathically. I know Mea said you didn’t need much sleep, but you must be tired.

Is that you, Teacher? I’ll be all right. Forty winks is all I need. Literally. A potion will take care of my exhaustion.

The physical stuff, sure, but what about mental exhaustion?

My race can sleep while we're awake. The driver's seat allows me more than enough rest, and these golem horses need only minimal instruction.

Wow, her powers really were impressive!

All right, but I'll keep a lookout too, just in case.

Thank you, I appreciate it.

I considered telling Kiara and the others about my existence, but I decided against it. Fran would probably be even more eager to tell Kiara than I was, but I needed to consult her about it first.

Meanwhile, Mea was still trying to persuade Kiara to get some sleep.

"You said that resting was part of a warrior's job."

"Hm, you've got me there. Ah, I never thought that a little bedwetter would be the one lecturing me."

"I...why are you bringing that up?!"

"I'm feeling nostalgic. Besides, it's true. Isn't it, Quina?"

"Indeed," Quina replied. "In fact, Mea gave me express orders to dispose of her sheets to avoid a scolding. In the end, the dirty sheets were found in the basement."

"Stop!"

"My lady, you will wake Fran with your shouting."

"Urgh..."

It wasn't long before everyone except Quina was asleep. It was much needed, and they had all more than earned it. While they slept, I kept watch and quietly healed their wounds.

Aside: Murelia

“**B**OLGARTH! What is the meaning of this?!”

“D-don’t speak to me that way!” he stammered. “I am the dungeon master. You have to do what I say!”

What a spineless waste of space! He was no more than an incompetent thief, incapable of even stealing your

attention! And he was truly under the impression that he had some kind of dignity, just because Linford gave him he had the right to command me. Pathetic!

“How dare you call me back here? I was about to make use of the Magnolian knights.”

“Th-they’re practically useless!” Bolgarth stammered. “And besides, you wasted the entire army of Fiends I gave to you!”

“You most certainly did *not* give them to me. If anything, I gave them to *you*.”

The chain of command in this dungeon was unusual, to say the least. This stuttering thief may be the dungeon master, but only because he happened to be present at the dungeon’s creation. He’d been lost in the mountains after escaping his bandit gang. When Linford infiltrated the dungeon with Fiendmancy, he conquered both it and Bolgarth with brute force. That was how he forced me to become the dungeon’s sub-master. The moment I was linked to it, the dungeon was imbued with unthinkable power.

Now, it could produce huge numbers of powerful monsters, but there was one small problem: none of them would listen to Bolgarth. They didn’t attack him, but they ignored all of his orders and instead looked to me for leadership. That made me the de facto master of this place, but I still had to follow Bolgarth’s orders. Still, I did not have much trouble forcing him to create monsters for me.

Not that Bolgarth was happy about it. That’s why he regularly sent me on errands, and even demanded that I fetch him drinks! What a petty man.

“This is my dungeon, you hear me! Mine! You listen to me!”

“Silence! Your shrill voice is grating on my ears.”

“H-how dare you?”

“How dare I what?”

I flashed my murderous intent, and Bolgarth turned suddenly

pale.

“Urgh...”

He might scream and shout, but he didn't have the guts to actually strike me. Following the commands of a weakling was humiliation enough, without having to listen to him talk. I needed to get straight to the point. I still had things to do. I needed the power of Johann's blood, or I would never be free of this dungeon. After that, I needed to get Romeo out of this country.

And I *had* to get him out. It was all I wanted.

Revenge? Linford? My right to the beast throne? None of that mattered. Only the child. To accomplish my goal, I needed House Magnolia to survive. Johann's powers were second only to Romeo's, and I needed him for the ritual. Specifically, I needed his heart. Only then could I get stronger. But at the moment, I needed Bolgarth to stop grumbling.

Unfortunately, that wasn't as easy as I'd thought.

“We have an intruder.”

“So you said. Is that the only reason you called me here? Do you remember how I left powerful monsters guarding the dungeon for just such an occasion? Use them and dispose of this so-called intruder.”

“I would,” Bolgarth complained, “if there were any of them left. Look!”

He showed me a crystal ball. It was full of manatech and allowed him to view every part of the dungeon. Sure enough, there was certainly an enemy in our midst, and he was making a terrible mess of the dungeon.

“That's...”

“See?! Your monsters are useless!”

Through the crystal ball, I saw a man cutting a swathe through the dungeon. No, not a man. An OGREKIN. And one specific OGREKIN at that. I knew this man, and so did Bolgarth, by the look of it. No wonder he had called me here. This was the worst possible outcome for us. I wasn't sure if I could defeat this intruder, even if I was still at full strength.

“H-handle it!”

“Me?”

“O-of course, you! You keep telling me I'm weak, so why don't you show me how powerful you are, oh, Lady Murelia?!”

“Ugh...”

I wanted to kill this bastard so bad! But right then, I had bigger problems.

This OGREkin made for a terrifying foe. Even Linford told me to avoid him at all costs. Bolgarth must have understood the danger, and now he was sending me against him.

“G-get rid of that OGREkin! Th-that’s an order!”

“Why must everyone get in my way...?!”

Four hours later, the golem carriage was speeding toward the northern mountains. The carriage never slowed down, and its horses never needed to take breaks. We were making good time.

Fran woke about an hour ago and poked her head out of the carriage to gasp at the glorious mountain before us. I thought she would have slept for longer, but she was too excited. Besides, she already looked much better.

“Wow, look at that mountain. It’s huge.”

It sure is. The peak is covered in clouds.

It might even be taller than Mount Everest for all I knew. Either way, it was certainly too high to calculate. Up close, it was too stunning for words. It didn’t spread out at the bottom like regular mountains, either. Instead, it rose straight up like a pillar, connecting the ground to the sky. From a distance, it looked like a giant tower or a waterfall of stone, pouring out of the clouds.

As we got closer, I saw that the incline wasn’t exactly vertical, but it was still devastatingly steep. More cliff than mountain, really. The base stretched out over several kilometers. We had no way to tell how tall it was from down here, but it must have been as much as several Matterhorns. Survival experts and top-level adventurers may be able to scale it, but it was not a vacation spot for ordinary civilians.

No wonder the Beastman Nation didn’t reinforce its northern border—the mountain was a natural garrison.

“We’re almost there,” Mea said. “How are you feeling, Master Kiara?”

“I’ll be fine. I’ve taken some potions. We got here quick.”

“Hm,” Fran agreed. “No time at all.”

“I suspect that’s because the two of you have spent the whole time talking!” Mea said.

I mean, she wasn’t wrong. Ever since Fran woke up, she and Kiara had been engaged in conversation, and about some quite brutal

topics: the monsters and warriors that Kiara had fought in the past, how to use Intimidate to break an opponent's will, and so on. Not the usual kind of stuff a grandma told her granddaughter, but I guess it was foolish to expect anything else.

Still, the conversation was useful. We learned that there were abilities beyond Flashing Thunderclap. Fran had learned Black Thunderfall on her own, while Kiara did the same with Black Lightning Strike. It really proved how much more experienced Kiara was. Even though Fran should be able to use Black Lightning Strike, she still couldn't pull it off. There was something missing.

"Urgh. What am I doing wrong?"

"Don't rush it," Kiara said. "You have already mastered so much. Just keep up with your training and you'll be using it in no time."

"Hm. I'll try."

As brutal as their conversation was, Fran seemed happy to be speaking to a member of her own race again.

"My lady?" Quina called from the driver's seat.

Mea tensed. "Huh? What's wrong?"

Quina didn't sound any different from normal, but Mea clearly heard the anxiety in the maid's voice.

"There is...a disturbance here."

Mea and Fran stuck their heads out of the carriage.

"Over there," Quina indicated.

"What...happened?" Mea asked.

Fran blinked at the scene in front of us.

"!"

The road ahead was littered with hundreds of monster corpses.

"Did these come from the dungeon?" Mea asked. "What *happened* to them?"

"Very strange," Fran agreed.

"Arf..."

Jet looked around, whining in fear. We climbed out of the carriage to get a better look. The monsters weren't just dead. They were crushed—as though they'd been flattened by some catastrophic force. Everything was squashed to the ground, from the smallest goblin to the largest dragon. And the terrain here had not been spared in the attack either.

“Look how deep it is...” said Mea.

“Hm.”

The rocky road stopped abruptly in front of us, dropping down into a sarcophagus a meter deep, filled with dead monsters.

“It’s so...flat,” Mea said, shaking her head.

The indentation was perfectly square and level, as though it had been flattened by a road roller. More than anything, it reminded me of a modern Japanese street. It looked as though a huge, hundred-meter-wide box had been dropped here and pressed down into the ground.

We checked the area and soon found it wasn’t the only one. The land here was covered in depressions—some of them deeper than others, so that they looked almost like a staircase where they overlapped. Whoever did this must have varied the pressure, using only what was needed to annihilate each group of monsters.

I looked for any crystals or materials that we could use, but there was nothing. Everything had been pulverized beyond the point of recovery.

I lifted a dead giant lizard with Telekinesis for further inspection. It looked like a pancake—almost all of its tough scales were shattered and its body was stiff as a board, meat fused with powdered bone.

When Fran tapped the flattened earth, it sounded just like stone. Whoever did this, they applied tremendous pressure. We might have been able to do something similar, but only over a very small area. The scale of this was mind-boggling.

“Who could have done such a thing...?” Mea asked.

No one comes to mind?

“No,” she said. “I have never seen anything like this. Any ideas, Quina?”

“None at all.”

“What about you, Master Kiara?”

“I’ve seen this,” the old cat said, looking grim.

I guess she didn’t make it to her old age for nothing.

“Master,” Mea said, surprised. “You know what caused this?”

“Yes. There is only one person in the world who can do this.”

She scanned the area nervously.

“Who is it?” Mea asked.

“The S-Rank adventurer, Friendly Fire Urslars.”

“A-are you sure?!”

“Not entirely. But if there is anyone else who can cause this havoc, then I do not know them.”

From the look on Mea’s face, this Urslars must be famous. Although I guess that made sense. He was an S-Rank, after all. But that didn’t explain how he got a crazy nickname like Friendly Fire.

“Who is he?” Fran asked.

“Woof?”

“You’ve never heard of him?” Mea asked.

“Hm.” Fran tilted her head. “Why the weird nickname?”

“The way I heard it,” Mea said, “he once fought in a war and attacked everyone. Friend and foe alike.”

“He decimated the enemy,” Quina agreed. “But his allies suffered great casualties.”

“There are plenty of other accounts attesting to that story. And to other instances.”

“The only reason he isn’t a wanted man is because he’s so powerful. He might cause grave injury to others, but he always brings victory with him.”

“Although it’s difficult to know what’s truth and what is rumor.”

“All that aside,” Kiara said, “he isn’t a bad man.”

“Really?”

“You cannot let your guard down around him, but he has a good heart.”

“You’ve met him?” Fran asked.

“A few times. He just loses sight of where he is in the heat of battle. But he knows that he is dangerous and mostly flies solo. If Urslars is here and we run into him, then you run when I tell you to. No questions asked. Understood?”

She gave Mea and Fran a grave look. I didn’t think I’d ever seen her so solemn. This Urslars must be extremely dangerous. We needed to know more about what we were up against.

“What powers does he have?” Fran asked.

“Right, I suppose you don’t know. It’s strange, I thought everyone had heard of him,” Mea said.

I knew S-Ranks were famous, but what was so special about this

one?

“Sir Urslars possesses a Godsword. The Land Sword Gaia.”

“A Godsword!”

“Woof!”

Wow!

No wonder this guy was so famous! And, knowing the name of his sword, I think I had an idea about how his attacks worked. Some Land Magic spells let you control gravity, after all. I figured that out when we acquired Great Wall. There were also spells that rained boulders down on your enemies. If the Land Sword was anything like its namesake, there was a good chance it could use those spells too. I didn't know how it flattened an entire area with gravity and boulders, but it certainly seemed reasonable that the Godsword was to blame.

“I've seen him create damage just like this,” said Kiara. “He did it with an enormous but perfect stone cube. It was beautiful, but the screams of the bandits it crushed sent shivers down my spine.”

Yep, it was Land Magic, and Urslars was beyond powerful. If he also couldn't tell friend from foe during a fight, that made him as good as a natural disaster.

“Friendly Fire Urslars. User of the Land Sword Gaia. Got it.”

“Not that we are certain yet that it is him,” said Kiara.

That was true. We didn't even know if he was going to the dungeon, although after walking for another ten minutes, it became clear that he was.

“He's definitely heading north,” Mea muttered.

“Hm.”

The landscape was covered with the same box-like depressions. The only difference here was the quality of the monsters. These were all powerful creatures, some of them huge, and all of them thoroughly crushed to death.

Eventually, we happened upon some kind of curved stone barrier, fifteen meters wide and five meters thick, enclosing the killing field. Upon closer inspection, the barrier was made of two large boulders, and dark red blood dripped between them. Whatever was inside had been crushed to death by the two huge slates. Looking at it, I imagined it had come straight out of the ground and snapped shut like a bear trap. And there were eight more of these grotesque sculptures all around us.

“It must be Urslars,” said Kiara. “I have seen him use this

technique before.”

The monsters must have come out of the dungeon. Did that mean that Urslars was inside?

“Is this why Murelia was called back?” Mea asked.

“It’s possible,” said Quina. “You are oddly sharp today, my lady.”

“Hey! I’m sharp every day! Anyway, we need to get to the dungeon quickly. Perhaps we can convince Urslars to join us.”

Asking Mr. Friendly Fire for help wasn’t high on my list of priorities, but I guess we only had to worry if the battle fury got to his head.

“Judging by the stories I have heard of him,” said Quina. “I doubt that he will be happy to help us.”

“Then we shall offer him a reward!” said Mea. “And I will make use of my feminine wiles, if need be.”

“Feminine...wiles...?”

“Wh-what?! Maybe he likes his women the way he likes his slates!”

“All right...”

“Don’t look at me like that!”

Apparently, Urslars didn’t like taking orders from anyone. He even went as far as arguing with an entire kingdom once. However, if he liked someone, he would do almost anything for them.

“Besides,” said Quina. “We don’t have the funds to hire an S-Rank adventurer.”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something. You must have *something* stashed away with your Maid Manners.”

“It doesn’t work like that. I can only use it when the occasion demands.”

“And this isn’t enough of an occasion for you?!” Mea demanded.

The longer this conversation went on, the more anxious I was getting.

“Either way,” said Mea. “We need to get to the dungeon.”

“Agreed.”

And so, we left the slate sarcophagi behind and got back into the carriage, heading north. As we climbed toward the dungeon, we came across three more of Urslars’ killing fields. And these ones were a cut

above this rest.

“This is awful...” Mea whispered.

The field around us was like a sea of blood. Fiend blood had seeped into the ground and the stench bled into the air. It smelled like a war zone. It must be even worse for the beastmen’s sensitive noses. Fran, Gwendartha, and Mea all winced.

Looking closer, it was clear that these Fiends had suffered a different fate from the monsters before. These were not flattened by some mysterious force; they’d been cut up with a sharp blade. And all of these impromptu amputations made for a *lot* of blood.

“Urslars?” Fran asked.

“I’m not sure,” Kiara admitted. “Gaia has the shape of a greatsword...but I don’t think he would want to kill them this way.”

Did he *want* to see blood for some reason? Maybe he just felt like moving between his enemies, or had some other reason to engage in melee. That all seemed more probable than the idea that someone completely unrelated came here and slaughtered these Fiends.

Those look like sword wounds to me.

“Monster claws could be sharper than a sword,” said Fran.

That is true. And that body there? It doesn’t look like it was killed by a person.

Its head had been popped clean off, and the legs had been torn away from the torso. It was a far cry from the precision of the crushing stone blocks.

We’ve got some elites here, too.

“Hm,” Fran said. “Goblin General. And a Goblin Lancer over there.”

The massacre was caused by someone who really didn’t care about cleanliness. They even left perfectly usable materials and crystals to rot. Still...waste not, want not, right?

I absorbed the Goblin General’s crystals, but in the end, it only yielded a single point.

What gives?

Elite goblins usually had between three and ten.

Fran, Jet, help me get the rest.

“Hm.”

“Woof!”

We gathered up the crystals from Orc Mages and Goblin Sorcerers and I absorbed them. They were all powerful foes, but again, they only yielded a single point each.

That's weird.

What's wrong? Fran asked.

I'm getting almost no crystals from these things.

Sounds like what happened with the Valkyrie.

She was right. The Valkyrie went berserk after equipping that Fiendstone spear, and these creatures were exactly the same way. Did the Evil One have something to do with this? Had something consumed the souls of these Fiends?

Be careful, you two.

"Hm."

I didn't like the idea of a soul-eater lurking around here. I scanned our surroundings, but I couldn't detect anything strange. Whatever had done this, it was probably long gone now. Even Jet's nose couldn't track it down.

"We need to be more careful from now on," said Mea.

"Indeed," Kiara agreed.

They'd also come to the conclusion that Urslars wasn't responsible for this. We debated sending Quina and Jet to scout ahead, but whatever did this might still be in hiding, and I didn't want them to run into it. In the end, we decided to rely on the carriage's stealth capabilities to reach the dungeon entrance.

In the end, nothing followed us—not the monsters, or the thing that killed them all. Maybe most of the dungeon's forces had been used in the invasion, or maybe they were just hiding from Urslars. Either way, it was lucky for us. The more fights we could avoid, the better.

"Look," said Quina, pulling the cart to a halt. "Over there."

"What is it?" Mea asked.

"That large rock. It must be the landmark that Johann Magnolia mentioned."

Quina pointed. Just ahead of us, a twisted spire of rock spiraled up into the sky like a dragon's horn.

"The dungeon entrance must be nearby," said Mea.

"Yes," Quina agreed. "It should be just beyond that forest."

The rock near the dungeon entrance was exactly how Johann

described it. If we went through the forest, the entrance should be just on the other side.

“Let’s go in on foot,” Quina suggested.

“Indeed,” said Mea. “Master Kiara, can you take point?”

“Leave it to me.”

“Quina, you take the rear.”

“Very well.”

Mea instinctively put the people with the most experience at the front and back of the party. It was a good call. We concealed our presence and headed into the forest. There was no road in here, but we were not at risk of losing our way: the monster army that spilled out of the dungeon last night had left a trail of destruction behind.

I expected to sense the dungeon’s mana but, in the end, it wasn’t so easy. The smarter dungeon masters regularly concealed their dungeon’s mana signature. Dungeons were equipped with lots of features and abilities, so mana concealment was pretty simple. The dungeon master could easily decide to hide their location, and this one clearly didn’t want to be found. That meant there would probably be lots of traps inside too. We were in for a rough ride.

The trees here were as thin and tall—too narrow and inaccessible to make good lumber, they’d been left to grow out of control. Once we fought our way through, we were at the foot of the mountain. As we reached the edge of the forest, Kiara stopped and hid herself in the undergrowth, gesturing for us to do the same.

“Master Kiara...?” Mea whispered.

“Over there,” said Fran.

The ground in front of the gaping mouth of the dungeon was a killing ground. The remains of Fiends were scattered everywhere. The cave was dark and silent. Nothing moved.

I don’t sense any mana nearby.

“Hm.”

The cave mouth was huge—over fifteen meters high and forty meters wide. Big enough to hold an entire village. We approached it slowly, weaving between moss-covered boulders and into the cave, where stalactites hung like jousting spears from the ceiling. It looked like a dangerous tourist spot from a travel show, but it wasn’t difficult to enter. Inside, the ground sloped gently downward. The whole place looked like it was naturally formed, until you looked at it closely. Then you noticed how the rocks were placed, shepherding you in. If

the rocks didn't tip you off, the gentle slope of the entrance should. It was too convenient to be an accident.

"The monster army must have come through here," Kiara said. "I can still see their tracks."

She sniffed the air and bent down to touch the ground. It just looked like a mess to me, but she was experienced enough to see things I couldn't.

"This is definitely the entrance," she said.

"Good," said Mea. "Let's get going."

"Stay sharp. We're headed straight for the core."

"Understood."

Kiara took the lead again and headed cautiously inside.

"That's..."

"Torches...?" Mea asked.

"Smells like blood," said Fran.

They stopped and took in our surroundings. The stalactites had disappeared, giving way to smooth stone. At the end of the tunnel, the front of a fortress blocked the way, lit up with hanging lamps. There were monster corpses and Fiends piled around us, all of them crushed to death. There was blood everywhere, as though they'd been crushed by the walls of their own dungeon. Which...actually, they probably had.

"Looks like Urslars went by here," Mea said.

"Yes. Quite impressive too," said Kiara. "I thought his attacks would be too unwieldy to use in here."

Urslars could easily hurt himself with his abilities, but gravitational manipulation should be fine, and Earth Magic was probably easier to use in a dungeon than Fire, Wind, or Water.

Fran had the same idea. "Is Land Magic useful in a dungeon?"

Kiara shook her head. "It may seem that way, but no."

"Why not?"

"It works fine in caves, but not all dungeons have soil to work with."

Some dungeon walls were solid stone, and the fact that they belonged to the dungeon made them difficult to control. I tried making some spikes out of the ground to test it out and found they used up more mana than usual. Spells that conjured their own soil were probably less affected, but manipulating the ground would be

difficult. It was hard to use without leveling up Land Magic and acquiring gravity spells. I didn't remember the dungeon in Ulmutt being this difficult to manipulate, but I guess it varied from dungeon to dungeon.

"Hrm!"

"Did you feel that?" Mea asked.

"Hm. Powerful mana."

We were still a good distance from the core, but the walls trembled around us, and everyone braced as they felt a massive release of mana.

"Someone is casting a powerful spell," said Kiara.

"Could it be Urslars?" Mea asked.

"Probably. We should hurry."

We advanced cautiously, but there were no traps waiting for us. Eventually, we found a staircase leading down.

"Hmm, so this way is just to reach the Beastman Nation?"

"It would seem so."

The dungeon itself was still mostly on the Basharlian side of the mountains. This passage was only a way out, and a route for the invasion. No wonder there were no traps.

"But why are there stairs?" Kiara asked. "Few monsters could fit down such a path."

She was right. The staircase was clearly built for humans. The largest monster that could fit through here was a Minotaur. An Ogre would struggle, and anything larger than that was straight out of luck. It was strange, considering the huge number of monster tracks leading out of the cave. How did they crawl out of this hole? Did the dungeon master just teleport them out? No, if he was going to do that, he would have dropped them right by the entrance. The tracks went too far in for that.

"This place keeps getting stranger," said Kiara. "But we can't go back now. Quina, can you scout ahead?"

"Right away, madam."

Scout ahead? Why the change in tactics? But as I wondered about it, Quina used her Phantasm Magic to conjure a small figure, a little larger than a doll. Apparently, it could detect auras and changes in temperature. Quina sent it ahead to map out the dungeon as best it could, tripping any traps it found and slipping past any monsters along the way.

“Excellent work,” said Kiara.

“You flatter me.”

“Let’s keep going.”

The inside of the dungeon was appropriately labyrinthine. The corridors were long with many dark branches, all full of traps and monsters. Although most of the monsters were dead and the traps had been tripped by whatever came through here before us. Was Urslars really an S-Rank adventurer? Shouldn’t he have been able to sense and disarm the traps, rather than just blazing through them?

Kiara seemed to read my mind.

“He hasn’t changed a bit,” the old cat said. “He probably sent a golem ahead of him to brute-force his way through.”

So Urslars used familiars just like we did, but with the express purpose of triggering every trap in the dungeon. It was certainly a useful strategy. Jean employed a similar one back in the floating dungeon.

“He should have a golem that can detect heat. Well, he made it work somehow.”

In the end, we didn’t trigger a single trap, and the trail of monster corpses stopped us from losing our way.

“It’s strange,” said Quina. “Johann didn’t mention the dungeon being this much of a maze.”

“Maybe he wasn’t hypnotized after all,” said Fran.

Had he been conscious and somehow fed us false information? Quina shook her head.

“He was hypnotized.”

And besides, Essence of Falsehood hadn’t raised any alarms either.

“Maybe he’s never actually been in here,” said Kiara.

“I suspect that is true,” said Quina. “He probably knows little of it.”

I guess it was possible, but there was another option. What if the dungeon expanded the minute Urslars entered it? In the face of such a significant threat, it made sense for the dungeon master to immediately swell his dungeon with traps and dead ends. I read a light novel once where the villain did exactly that. It would certainly explain Johann’s ignorance, the sudden disappearance of monster tracks, and the human-scale labyrinth around us.

And Murelia did say that you could expand a dungeon by spending GP. Back in Ulmutt, we saw Lumina create a new room in her dungeon, right before our eyes. Creating an entire labyrinth wasn't out of the question.

Either way, it was all just speculation on my part. It didn't actually help us advance.

An hour later, still on the trail of the intruder we assumed to be Urslars, we finally reached the end of the labyrinth. The air was different here, and the way ahead was blocked by a giant door. In any normal dungeon, the boss room would be on the other side.

As uneventful as our trek was, it sure took a long time. If the dungeon had been fully populated, it would have taken even longer. Along the way, I'd sensed immense releases of mana, so there was definitely a fight going on somewhere. Now, I could feel that same mana coming from behind this door. There were people fighting on the other side. Two entities, both with powerful mana signatures.

"You can't normally enter while a fight is in progress," Kiara mused.

"But it looks like we can get in here," said Quina.

They approached the door, inspecting its mechanisms.

"No traps."

"It isn't even locked."

It was all surprisingly easy.

"Come on, then!" said Mea. "We may still be in time to assist Urslars!"

"Assist?!" said Kiara. "Don't be silly. That man has no need of us, and you must *not* approach him, do you understand? Not until I say so. One wrong move, and he'll kill you where you stand."

She was really shaken up about this Urslars guy. He must be extremely dangerous. Gwendartha gulped, his large body trembling.

"Master Kiara... is Friendly Fire really so terrifying?"

"How do you think he got that nickname? The most dangerous thing in this dungeon isn't Murelia," Kiara warned, lowering her voice. "It's Urslars gone berserk. Remember that."

Mea nodded. "Understood."

"Hm. Got it," Fran agreed.

"..."

Gwendartha stood speechless and frozen. He nodded, or perhaps it was just a shiver. The maids, on the other hand, remained as composed as ever.

Still, Mea wasn't inclined to hang around.

"But surely," she said, "you don't expect us to sit out here and wait for you outside?"

"Of course not," said Kiara. "We do not even know for certain if Ursalars is inside."

"Well, in that case!"

"On we go," Kiara said.

She touched the door and hesitated, but the door rumbled open before she could change her mind. Behind it, there was a large arena—like a subterranean colosseum. And, just like the colosseum, a fierce battle was already underway.

In one corner was a huge, horned giant of a man, and in the other, a triceratops-like monster over twenty meters long. The fight was so powerful that you could feel mana rippling through the door.

The monster was at least a C-Threat, and maybe more. There is no way we could have taken it down, at least, not without risking severe injury. Which made sense, since this was the dungeon's final room. But the creature's body was covered with bloody wounds. It had lost three of its five horns and two of its six legs, and it was dripping dark blue blood. Its thick hide and armor plating cracked and peeled away, revealing raw skin beneath. It was close to dying, and probably didn't have enough energy to regenerate. Even if we just left it alone, it would probably just bleed to death.

Its challenger, on the other hand, was completely unharmed. In fact, he hadn't even broken a sweat. Despite coming up against an almost B-Threat, he was dominating the fight.

"Mooooooooorgh...!"

The monster roared, exhausted and rooted in place. Its eyes flashed white with fear as it bellowed at the man, desperately trying to intimidate him. The man studied the beast for a moment, then raised his left hand and placed his right on his greatsword. I could feel the mana swirling around him.

"Crush," he whispered.

"Bloooooorgh!"

The two sides of the arena snapped shut like a book, crushing the monster between them. The beast let out a pitiful cry, its eyes and

tongue bulging with the pressure. Blood sprayed from every wound in its body and shot up the walls. When the two sides of the arena finally opened back up, the monster was little more than a grotesque lump.

I immediately Identified Urslars, and he was quite the beast himself. Not only did he have a bunch of titles, but also a load of skills I hadn't seen before. His stat sheet rivaled the Beast King's.

Name: Urslars

Age: 148

Race: Ogrekin; Calamity Ogre

Class: Ogre Warrior

Level: 82/99

HP: 2987; Magic: 1009; Strength: 1519; Agility: 599

Skills: Strange Food 6; Intimidate 10; Transport 6; Stealth 5; Disassemble 7; Recovery Speed Up 7; Brute Strength 10; Martial Arts 6; Martial Mastery 6; Environmental Resistance 7; Presence Sense 6; Breath Control: Harden 9; Fast Regeneration 7; Brute Force 10; Regeneration 10; Abnormal Status Resistance 9; Blink 6; Mental Status Resistance 4; Elemental Blade 8; Greatsword Mastery 10; Greatsword Arts 10; Advanced Greatsword Mastery 8; Advanced Greatsword Arts 8; Land Magic 6; Jump 6; Earth Magic 10; Breath Control: Soften 3; Vigor 6; Logging 7; Physical Barrier 6; Magic Resistance 6; Mana Sense 4; Cooking 6; Disarm Trap 5; Trap Sense 5; Back From the Brink; Spirit Control; Steel Body; Raise Will; Enhanced Land; Intuition; Pain Immunity; Dragon Slayer; Mana Manipulation; Strength Up (Large)

Unique Skill: Corruption Killer; Mad God of Strength; Dread; Ogre God's Blessing

Extra Skill: Godsword Release

Class Skill: Mad Ogre; Dark Ogre

Titles: Corruption Killer; Butcher; Chosen of the Godsword; Earth Mage; Dungeon Conqueror; Dragon Slayer; Friend Killer; Battle Maniac; Destroyer of Monsters; S-Rank Adventurer

Equipment: Earth Sword Gaia; Earth Dragon Horn Headband; Steel Dragon Shell Greatarmor; Cloud Dragon Leather Suit; Mirage Dragon Cloak; Bracelet of Mental Calm; Ring of Anger Dissipation



No wonder he was S-Rank. He wasn't just impressively strong; he had powerful skills to go with it.

For the first time in a long time, I felt afraid. Afraid of the power of this man, and afraid of being on the receiving end of it. I had to keep an eye on Urslars for as long as we were here. I had to make sure Fran didn't get hurt.

Although...he didn't exactly seem like the type to lose his mind. His eyes were focused and steady on the dead monster in front of him. As the floor thudded back down into place, Mea and Gwendartha came back to their senses, but they still weren't thinking clearly. We were in enemy territory, and they'd zoned out—leaving themselves completely exposed. Mea went to step forward, but Kiara grabbed her by the shoulder and gave her a grave look.

“S-sorry...” Mea stammered, shaking her head.

“It's all right. Stand back now.”

Mea complied, and Kiara went in alone. Fran and the others shifted their weight slightly forward, ready to jump into action, but they kept their weapons sheathed. The last thing we needed right now was a misunderstanding—especially after watching him turn that giant monster into a meat slab.

“It's been a long time, Urslars,” Kiara said, smiling to cover the shake in her voice.

“Hunh? Who are you...?”

Urslars turned around and glared at her. The rest of us shuddered with fear, but the heavy cloud of intimidation scattered as soon as he laid eyes on Kiara.

“Is that really you? Look at you! You're a grandma now!”

He smiled, as though he hadn't just looked like he was going to murder us all.

“Hmph,” said Kiara, crossing her arms. “And I see you haven't changed a bit.”

“Bwa ha ha ha! You know us Ogrekin!”

“Good to see you're lucid today. Come along, everyone!”

We approached cautiously, but Urslars just grinned at us all.

“Funny place for a field trip, isn't it?”

“They might be little ankle-biters now, but one day, they'll be big enough to pull your whole leg off. Although admittedly, I *am* chaperoning today.”

Fran and the others didn't quite know what to make of Urslars. How had this kind adventurer earned the name Friendly Fire?

Meanwhile, I was fixated on the gigantic sword on his back. The crimson handle alone was over a meter long and the tip of the blade dragged along the ground, even though Urslars had it slung over his shoulder. And its size wasn't the only impressive thing about it. The sword had a kind of aura, as though its mere presence was enough to make the blood resonate. I steadied myself in my sheath so I didn't start rattling.

So this is what a Godsword looks like.

I couldn't help but Identify it.

Name: Earth Sword Gaia

Attack: 2000; MP: 6000; Durability: 10000

Mana Conductivity: SS

Skill: Imbue Divine Earth Element; Enhanced Land Magic; Imbue Land Magic; Land Immunity; Mana Regeneration (Massive); Mana Command

Wow, this thing was *powerful*. In terms of raw strength, I was completely outclassed, but more than that, Gaia was specialized in Land Magic. And yet...I couldn't help but wonder. I mean, don't get me wrong, this thing was strong, but was it really a *superweapon*? A group of experienced sorcerers could probably go toe-to-toe with it, not to mention the fact that its name was "Earth Sword" and not "Land Sword."

Maybe it couldn't access its full power yet, like Lind? Although Urslars' Extra Skill, Godsword Release, was probably the key. If it did unlock the sword's full power, it was the most powerful skill he had.

Suddenly, Urslars looked straight at me.

"Who Identified me?"

Crap, I was rumbled. But...how did he do that without Identify Sense?

"I got tingles just now, like someone was watching me. Intuition's doing its job."

Mea and Gwendartha shrank away from the accusing look in Urslars' eyes.

"Apologies, friend," said Kiara. "I taught the children to never let their guard down in a dungeon. It would appear they have taken that

advice literally.”

Urslars turned to look at her and burst into uproarious laughter.

“Bwa ha ha ha! You taught them good! I’m not mad. I always look like this. I just wanted to make sure. But to see the mad dog...or should I say mad cat Kiara apologize for someone else! You’ve gone soft! Not that it’s a bad thing.”

“Indeed.” Kiara smiled, the creases showing in the corners of her eyes. “We don’t all have the luxury of staying the same forever.”

“True enough! For some of us, change isn’t easy at all.”

Kiara tilted her head. “You’re still searching, then?”

“That I am...”

It looked like the two of them had an understanding.

When we walked in, I was worried that this guy would be some kind of monster but, now that he’d started talking, he just seemed like a gruff middle-aged man. He reminded me of Donadrond, back in Alessa. Only bigger. And scarier.

“You are looking for something, Sir Urslars?” Mea asked, now that everyone had relaxed.

“Yep. For a way to break my curse.”

“Curse?” Mea asked.

There was nothing on his stat sheet like that. Slowly, Urslars explained.

“Aye,” said the big man. “A curse, and a blessing also. It’s my Class Skill, Mad Ogre Form. I’ve been trying to get rid of it for years.”

“What does it do?” Mea asked.

“It magnifies some of my skills and abilities and grants me superhuman regeneration. With that thing running, I am five times the man I am now.”

What?!

What kind of a messed-up curse was that? It sounded broken!

Mea was just as puzzled as I was. “But then...why...”

Urslars made himself a chair from the earth on the area floor and sat down.

“Because it comes at a cost. A bad one.”

He chuckled, but I could sense the despair lurking behind it. Urslars fell silent, looking down at his hands. His eyes were filled with pain, so much so that Kiara took over explaining for him.

“Mad Ogre Form triggers when he is fighting,” she said. “He cannot choose when, and he loses all reason the whole time that it is active. The only thing that remains is his knowledge of combat. Paired with the strength of a Godsword, it is hardly a blessing. It wreaks havoc and destruction on friend and foe alike.”

He had lived with it for long enough to anticipate it and take himself away into the wilderness where he couldn't hurt anyone. However powerful the skill was, the price it demanded made it a terrible curse.

Friend Killer. That title must be enough to give him nightmares.

It was horrible. Surely, there had to be something we could do about it? We had Skill Taker, after all. But...what if we were forced to equip it as soon as we obtained it? We'd just be transferring the curse, not removing it.

I wasn't the only one who had that thought.

“Isn't there some adventurer who can get rid of skills?” Mea asked.

“Sure is. Black Spot Maleficent has Skill Eraser. Wipes out a skill like it never existed. I tried it once.”

“But it didn't work?”

“Oh, it worked. It disappeared just like that, and old Maleficent had to wait a whole year for her skill to recharge. Mad Ogre Form came back in two days.”

“Wh-what?!”

“Class Skills run deep. They always come back with time. Tried Skill Taker, too. Same story.”

Well, so much for my idea.

Urslars sighed. “It all started when I mutated into a Calamity Ogre. I was an ordinary Ogrekin before that.”

“Mutated?” Fran asked. “Not Evolved?”

Urslars nodded. “Evolution happens when a skill is maxed out, or when it takes on a new form. Mutation happens when you meet certain...other conditions. It changes skills. They might seem similar, but mutations have far more limited effects.”

He really did seem like a nice guy.

Since Evolution took more effort to unlock, the effects were more powerful.

“Becoming a Calamity Ogre is very unusual. Even the Ogrekin

thought that it was a myth. A curse that brings destruction and calamity. Never thought it would happen to me.”

The mutation was so rare, it had passed into legend. And now, a man with a Godsword was in possession of it. People said he could take down an army, but I suspected that he could take out an entire kingdom if things went south.

“Anyway,” said Urslars. “That’s how I got stuck with the damned thing. Unfortunately, OGREKIN can only mutate once in their lives, and we can’t get rid of the Class Skills that we get upon mutation. The best I can hope to do is seal it away. I’ve figured out how to deal with it for short periods, but there has to be a more permanent solution.”

“Is that why you’re here in this dungeon, Sir Urslars?” Mea asked.

“You know what they say about dungeons: they’re connected to the roots of the world. I’ve been through a lot of them, and maybe I’ll find what I’m looking for here. But really, I’m here on an errand.”

“An errand?” Kiara asked.

Who exactly was he working for?

“No harm in telling you, I suppose. The gods are my clients.”

“Wh-what?”

Kiara was puzzled, but Urslars was still smiling.

“Heh heh. The gods are mighty interested in anyone who holds a Godsword, you know. They’ve been watching me for a while now.”

No surprise, really, considering the Godsword users were almost as powerful (and dangerous) as the Evil One himself.

“They send me oracles from time to time,” Urslars explained. “I suppose that’s fair enough.”

“So the gods ordered you to come here?”

“Nothing so official. They just gave me the coordinates of this place. That’s all.”

“And that *doesn’t* count as an order?” Mea asked.

I had to agree with her, especially since it came straight from the gods. But Urslars shook his head.

“I’ve had express orders twice before. This was more like a request. I’ve ignored similar requests in the past and they’ve never chased me up about it.”

“Y-you ignored oracles from the gods?!” Kiara spat.

“I was in the middle of an important mission. And besides, they

can't have been too upset, considering that I'm not dead or cursed. Well, no *more* cursed than before."

Still, he was pretty brave to ignore a request from the gods. There weren't many people in this world who'd dare to do that. Although I suppose getting stuck with a terrible skill he never asked for had given him a dim view of divine power.

"But how can you be sure?" Kiara asked, looking worried. "What if there is a binding punishment on you?"

Urslars chuckled. "Like the Tragedy of Laurentia?"

"Exactly."

"What's the Tragedy of Laurentia?" Fran asked.

"Oh? You're not from around here, little cat?" Urslars asked.

"Hm."

"Ah, well, that makes sense."

According to Urslars, the Tragedy of the Laurentia happened one hundred and fifty years ago on the continent of Chrome, but it began with an incident fifty years before that.

At that time, there was a small kingdom called Laurentia south of the Beastman Nation. The king was young and patriotic and couldn't stand to see his beloved nation treated as a mere vassal to their large and powerful neighbor. He wondered if there was some way for Laurentia to stand on its own feet. That's when he called for a Fiendmancer and began sacrificing souls to the Evil One.

Really? Again?! What was going on in these stories? Does political power make people stupid or something?

The king eventually became a Fiendmancer and used his power to pursue his goal. But this one didn't try to break the Evil One's seal and revive him. Instead, he used Fiendmancy to summon a huge army of powerful goblins and sent them flooding into the Beastman Nation to destabilize it. He taxed his own people heavily to buy more sacrificial slaves and sent anyone who couldn't pay their taxes to the knife.

Ultimately, his plan failed when the people of Laurentia rose up and overthrew him. In the end, the Fiendmancers were summarily executed, and after some negotiation, the king suffered the same fate.

After that, the royal family scattered and the Kingdom of Laurentia became the Republic of Laurentia, complete with representative government. The senate stripped the other royals of their dignity and sent them to live a life of slavery in the frontier

lands, clearing the wilds. It was a dangerous place, full of difficult terrain and powerful monsters, and most expected the royal bloodline to disappear forever.

And yet, the line did not end there. In fact, the remaining royals worked hard to cultivate the frontier, as well as running its orphanages, hospitals, and convalescent houses for the injured—making a significant contribution to the Republic of Laurentia.

Fifty years later, Laurentia's view of its former royal family had greatly improved. Eventually, they decided to free them from their lives of slavery and allow them to return to the republic. The royals seemed to have had a genuine change of heart. When they returned, they were welcomed back, and even treated like celebrities.

But the gods were not pleased with this decision and still remembered the weight of their sins.

They cursed the Laurentia family with divine retribution for using the Evil One to summon a massive horde of Fiends. To many, the punishment seemed too harsh and to come too late, but there was no questioning the will of the gods. One by one, the beloved royals lost their lives, until the only Laurentians left were Laurentians in name only, not actual blood relations. All across Chrome, this became known as the Tragedy of Laurentia.

"It's safe to say," said Urslars, "that the gods take a long view of things."

"A long view?" Mea asked.

"The gods have been here since the beginning of everything," he said. "I expect time must feel different to them. Fifty years might seem like a long time to pronounce judgment to us, but for an immortal? It might have felt like five seconds."

That made sense, I guess. After all, humans and insects had different perceptions of time too. What seemed a short while to a human might take up the whole of a bug's life. As men to insects, so gods to men.

"Exactly," said Kiara. "Maybe you just haven't been punished yet."

"Ga ha ha! No need to worry about that, old cat. I have it on good authority that I'm in the clear. One of their messengers told me."

"Y-you've met a messenger from the gods?!"

"That's right. Twice, when the gods gave me divine missions. Sending a messenger was the least they could do at that point, if you ask me. I asked it about all the times I've ignored their oracles, and it

said they didn't mind."

Kiara shook her head. "You're out of your mind. Still, I wonder why the gods don't seem to mind you ignoring their requests."

"Beats me. Who knows how they work up there. The messenger said they 'might as well.'"

"Might as well."

Ursalars proceeded to explain his theory: how the gods usually left the world to its own devices, but they kept a keen eye on the Fiends. While they never went so far as to eradicate them all, the gods still seemed to consider them a problem that needed addressing.

That's where the Godswords came in. The gods kept tabs on each sword and could send oracles to whoever wielded them. Might as well make the best of a Godsword's user.

"Like I said, the gods take a long view of things. Without the Godsword users, it would probably take them decades to spot an incident and arrange everything to contact someone capable of doing something about it."

If divine retribution took fifty years, then oracles might take decades to accomplish.

"Why go to all that trouble when you have people who are only a Godsword away?" Ursalars went on. "We're more convenient for them. Anyway, they suggested I take a look in this dungeon, so I thought I'd give it a try."

Convenient? I was increasingly unsure if owning a Godsword was all it was cracked up to be, but apparently, I was the only one who felt that way. Mea and Gwendartha were practically green with jealousy. Even Kiara, who didn't take orders from anyone, seemed to accept it without question.

I guess that, in a world where the gods clearly existed, receiving an oracle was a great honor. It meant that you were considered worthy of divine attention.

Have you ever received any oracles, Mea?

Teacher? No, I can't say that I have. I'm probably not recognized as the true user of a Godsword yet—not by the sword itself, and not by the gods.

That couldn't be easy for her to swallow.

But I'll win their favor one day! she promised.

Aside: Ligdartha

“THESE FORTIFICATIONS have come a long way since I last saw them. Excellent work, as always.”

“Thank you, Sir Ligdartha,” said the human, smiling at me.

He was a court mage for the Beastman Nation, and his name was Lucius Laurentia—a descendant of the very same house destroyed almost a hundred and fifty years ago. He was also one of the greatest Land Mages on the continent, earning him the nickname of Great Wall Lucius.

Looking at him, you’d never suspect he was capable of throwing up a giant spire and killing hundreds of our enemies at once, but a fierce determination lurked behind his smile. We were the same age, and over the past thirty years, he had become a dear friend and a powerful ally.

“You sure you’re not pushing yourself too hard?” I asked.

Lucius conjured these fortifications with a spell called Great Wall. It was a notorious mana sink, and he had come straight out of battle. He must be exhausted.

“A man has to protect his home,” he said. “And the Beastman Nation was the only one kind enough to take me in and treat me with decency, instead of branding me as a traitor to mankind.”

“Is that so?”

“Indeed. Besides, you are pushing yourself just as hard. I saw the White Rhinos charge into battle from the top of my little fort. I never imagined that a few hundred warriors could fight their way to the heart of a whole army.”

But they did, and I had led them there myself. My name is Ligdartha, and I am the patriarch of the White Rhinoceros tribe, younger brother to the king’s own personal bodyguard, Diamond Wall Gaudartha and Deputy Commander in our battle against the Basharlians. It is my duty to be on the frontlines, and to raise our troops’ morale.

“So is something the matter?” Lucius asked. “I can’t imagine you’re visiting the troops just to reminisce with me.”

“Indeed. Here, have a look at this.”

“What is it?”

I handed over the missive I’d received from headquarters. Lucius read through it carefully. By the time he’d finished, he looked

frustrated and annoyed, which is exactly how I'd felt when I saw it.

"Who are the Krishna royals?" he asked. "I've never heard of them."

"They ruled the Beastman Nation about five hundred years ago. Apparently, they're claiming that the Narasimhas seized the throne from them."

I'd asked the commander and our general if the accusations were true, but all they'd say was that it didn't matter. Which was true enough, I guess. I did matter, but not in the middle of a battlefield at least.

Still, I figured the story had a grain of truth. The circumstances under which our current royal family, the Narasimhas, ascended to the throne were only passed on from patriarch to patriarch, and I had to admit, that was pretty suspicious. Still, our king was a good one, and it really wasn't the time to be fanning the flames of old feuds.

Claims about legitimacy came up every time there was a war, but that didn't mean we could safely ignore them. For tribes with lifespans as long as us beastmen, five hundred years wasn't exactly very long. And besides, if Basharl really *did* have a member of the Krishna family in their midst, it could make a real mess of any post-war negotiations. The conspiracy was all the more probable considering Basharl's lack of neighboring allies.

"And she's a Fiend too?" Lucius asked.

"Yeah. Apparently, the Narasimhas chose her as a priestess when they seized the throne, so they could sacrifice her to the Evil One."

"They clearly want to smear the Narasimhas and curry support for the Krishnas."

"Exactly," I agreed. "They've also said that they're obliged to help restore the rightful ruling family to the throne. As though deposing our own king is simply the act of a good neighbor."

We didn't know for sure whether Basharl was in league with Fiends, but this was definitely part of some bigger plan. They'd spread this propaganda through other kingdoms too, and not just in writing. Now we had to deal with inquiries from other nations about the letter. They even seemed to think there was an element of truth in it.

Lucius shook his head. "No good can come from the power of the Evil One."

"And I suppose you would know that better than anyone."

"Quite. When I was a boy, there wasn't a day that people didn't throw rocks at me for being 'the Fiendmancer's son.'"

I sighed. “Linford.”

“He’d abandoned us by the time I was ten. I barely remember anything about him, just that he was always grinning to himself. I think he must have been crazy. I was fortunate that the Beast King took me in. My father spent decades being hated as a descendant of a Fiendmancer. I suppose he finally snapped.”

“And you haven’t seen him since?” I asked.

“No. My father was an old man when I was born. If he’s still alive, he’d be almost a hundred years old. And I really don’t think...”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“That’s all right. I’m only looking for him so that I can put him to rest with my own hands. But never mind that. This letter is far more concerning.”

“It is at that, my friend. It is at that.”

The battle against Basharl seemed to be going well. So why was I getting a massive headache?

“I hope I’ve answered some of your questions at least,” Urslars said, standing from his improvised chair. “Now leave.”

“What?!” Mea protested. “But we just got here!”

“And you are not necessary. Kiara, please see the children out.”

“All right.”

“But Master Kiara, we can help!”

Kiara shook her head. “You can feel it, can’t you, Urslars?”

“Yeah, it’s that same sinking feeling. If you don’t want me to kill you, you’ll leave.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. Mad Ogre Form must be close to triggering. I’d already seen the sort of damage Urslars could do under normal circumstances. I had no desire to see him amplified fivefold.

Fortunately, Kiara understood.

“Come, Mea.”

“V-very well.”

“You too, Fran.”

“Hm...”

They both nodded, looking equally disappointed. Mea didn't like the idea of leaving Urslars to take care of something that she felt was her own responsibility. She'd already expressed frustration about not being recognized as a true Godsword user, and I suspect this didn't help. Fran, meanwhile, just wanted to see Urslars in action. Still, this couldn't be helped. Nothing was worth the risk of him turning on us in a fight. There was nothing we could do to change his mind, and Urslars was more than strong enough to take on whatever awaited him.

We should get out of here.

"Hm."

"Quina," Kiara said. "Open the door."

"Affirmative. Watch my back, Mianoa."

"Very well, Miss Quina."

Quina led the way to the entrance, while Mianoa took the rear. They probably wanted to stop Mea from doing anything stupid. Without the maids' careful oversight, they expected the princess to sneak away and follow Urslars.

"..."

Quina frowned at the door. She looked troubled. So troubled that all of us noticed.

"What's the matter?" Kiara asked.

"It won't open."

"What?"

"Something has changed. I could open it before."

Quina had checked when we entered the room to make sure the door still opened from inside, but now it was sealed shut. That wasn't a good sign. I prepared a Dimension Gate to get us away. It might not be enough to take us out of the dungeon, but we didn't need to go that far. We only needed to get out of this room. Unfortunately, my spell wouldn't activate.

What's going on...?

The spell was working; I just couldn't focus my mana into it. Even Seal Immunity wasn't helping. That meant my Timespace Magic wasn't sealed. There was something *else* disrupting it.

Teacher?

I can't warp out of here, Fran.

This all felt kinda familiar. It was the same sensation as

Murelia's teleportation-disrupting dome. Then, almost as soon as I'd thought that...

"Aha ha ha! No one is getting through that door. And you can forget about your precious teleportation, too!"

"That voice..." Mea muttered.

Fran glanced around. "Murelia?"

Everyone immediately prepared for battle.

"Correct!"

Murelia warped into the opposite side of the room. Her Fiend powers gave her a clean route through her own barriers. She had an insane smile on her face, but her Malice was greatly reduced from before. Had Fiend Crusher Revelation done that? Even diminished as she was, Murelia was still powerful. We couldn't let our guard down.

"To think that I would get a visit from a Godsword user," said Murelia. "And you tore through my new labyrinth so quickly!"

"You're the dungeon master?" Urslars asked.

"No, but I have ties with this dungeon."

"I see..."

Urslars drew Earth Sword Gaia and readied himself. He'd sensed her Malice and identified her as an enemy, but Murelia wasn't the only thing he was worried about.

He turned around, "Kiara..."

"I know."

"Protect those whippersnappers, okay?"

"Don't worry, Urslars. I have them."

What now? Should we just run around the room and hope we didn't get in Urslars' way? Maybe we could kill Murelia before he went berserk. Together, we were certainly strong enough to pull it off. The sooner we could get it over and done with, the better. If Urslars lost it, it was game over. Seemingly, he had the same thought.

"We need to beat her fast. Try to keep up."

"All right," Kiara agreed. "Everyone, listen to Urslars."

"Of course!" Mea agreed, happy to fight alongside an S-Rank.

"Hm!"

"Woof woof!"

Fran and Jet were pumped to fight at least, while Quina and

Mianoa also nodded in their usual stoic way.

“Fran’s weapon has Fiend Crusher Revelation. It’s very effective against Fiends,” said Kiara.

“Really?” said Urslars. “Excellent.”

It was our trump card against Murelia, and we’d made sure to explain it to everyone.

“Now listen, little cat,” said Urslars. “Don’t get so excited that you get smacked by my attacks, you hear me?”

“Hm!”

“Looks like you’ll be fine. Seriously, how did you get so strong at your age? People say Black Cats are the weakest of all beastmen, but with you and Kiara around, I find that pretty hard to believe.”

They really were special exceptions. They were easily the two strongest Black Cats alive, and yet Murelia seemed strangely unfazed. She was just standing there with a sick grin on her face.

“Are you done talking?” she asked.

“You don’t seem worried at the prospect of fighting us,” said Urslars.

“You could say that. Still, I would like to ask you something before we begin.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“Are you sure you should be fighting anyone right now?” Murelia asked. “You seem somewhat...on the brink.”

Urslars clicked his tongue.

“You are clearly the most powerful member of your little group,” said Murelia. “And you managed to make it all the way here on your own. You must have fought many battles along the way, and it seems that you lose a little more of your mind each time. I do hope you don’t ruin your hard work by slaughtering all of your new friends.”

“Guess we’ll just have to kill you before I go crazy!” Urslars roared.

And with that, the battle began. Urslars charged Murelia, fully intent on finishing the battle in one swing, but she teleported quickly away, and the room shook as his Godsword slammed into the ground. Her No Cast was still a problem, but our numbers gave us an advantage.

“Haaa! Flashing Thunderclap!”

“Aha ha!” Murelia laughed. “So persistent!”

“Hmph!”

Fran turned, anticipating Murelia’s teleportation path. We might not be able to teleport ourselves, but we could still sense the spatial disruptions they caused.

Haaaaa!

“Tsch!”

With the added speed of Flashing Thunderclap, Fran rained attacks down on Murelia. We wanted to pressure her, and thanks to Fiend Crusher Revelation, every hit drained her Malice. Meanwhile, I transmogrified my ribbons back into steel strings. I was getting more used to controlling them, but this time, Murelia was prepared.

“That was close!”

Damn it, I missed.

Murelia kept warping around, but she didn’t seem to be fighting back at all. Was she *that* worried about Fiend Crusher Revelation?

“Well, that was scary,” Murelia said with an air of superiority. “You’re definitely using some unorthodox tactics there, but how long can you keep it up? Just save yourselves the time and effort and surrender now.”

She was the only one here who could teleport, but did it really give her so much of an advantage? Or did she have another ace up her sleeve? She kept dodging Kiara and Mea and only attacked to lay down suppressive fire.

“Come on!” Murelia gloated. “What happened to your confidence? You can’t kill me with those weak attacks!”

All of this was just to buy time. We realized it, but we *still* couldn’t land an attack on her. A powerful area effect would have done the trick, but the arena was too cramped and there were too many of us. And besides, I was betting that Murelia could teleport out of the room if she wanted to.

What we needed was a continuous attack that covered a lot of ground and could catch her *after* she teleported. And, as far as I could see, Fran and Urslars were the only ones capable of pulling it off. Quina and Mianoa were both melee specialists, Mea and Kiara couldn’t sense Murelia’s teleportation path, and Jet lacked the firepower. Meanwhile, I could predict her teleportation path with Timespace Magic, and Urslars could rely on his Intuition. Either of us could do it, but I was worried about allowing him to deal the finishing blow.

Urslars was, after all, the reason Murelia was stalling. If she held

us off for long enough, sooner or later, he'd go berserk. And gods help us all if that happened. All of which meant that it was down to us to finish Murelia off, and fast.

I couldn't feel Urslars' rage mounting, and his expression was getting more frantic. Murelia was right. We were running out of time.

Fran?

Hm?

I'm going to stop her from moving. Be ready! You have to land a solid hit to kill her.

Got it.

Murelia teleported herself out of the path of Mea's White Fire, and I transmogrified myself again—spreading myself wider, making myself thinner and sharper. Multi Mind allowed me to achieve exactly what I wanted.

Fiend Crusher Revelation...activate!

I needed that skill on each and every needle. It was the only way to pin her down.

Hurrrrgh!

The mental strain was agonizing. It was worse than using Multi Mind to cast several spells at once. I might not have any pain receptors, but I could still suffer. The whole world was full of a deafening creaking noise that wouldn't stop, but I couldn't hold back now. I transformed the rest of my body into steel wire, taking the shape of a giant spider web and covering the arena.

"Urgh!" Murelia cried. "What kind of an attack is *this?!?*"

Now I've...got you!

The web caught Murelia as she came out of a teleport. The fine wires sliced through her, taking off her right arm and left leg. I tightened my hold, and the Malice drained out of her body.

You're not getting away this time!

Hrrrrgh...!

I opened a path just big enough for Fran to get through. Once she saw what I was doing, she charged right in. The path was crowded from all sides with steel wire, but Fran ignored the small scratches as she bore down on Murelia.

My blade was no larger than the size of a dagger, but Fran plunged me straight into Murelia's heart.

"Haaaa!"

Just...die!!!

“Urgh...”

All I had to do was release the full power of Fiend Crusher Revelation, and destroy her from inside...but I couldn't pull it off in time.

Murelia pushed the threads out of the way with compressed Malice and teleported away. When she reappeared, there was a gaping hole in her torso, but she wasn't losing strength anymore. Still, her Malice was less than half what it had been to start off with. We were gaining on her.

Teacher, are you okay?

I should be asking you that!

I'll heal. But you don't look so good.

Yeah...

I didn't even have enough energy to pretend otherwise. Turning myself into that steel web and covering the whole thing with Fiend Crusher Revelation had almost torn me apart.

But the fight isn't over yet!

All right...

Fran glared at Murelia. Despite the fact her Malice supplies were almost exhausted, she was still grinning.

“Aha ha ha ha! You lot really are strong!” she said.

“Thanks...” Urslars said cautiously.

How could she be so relaxed? Whatever was happening, this was definitely our chance. We had to finish her off before she could teleport again.

Was I going to pass out? No, I had to stay focused!

The air in the arena was quiet and dense. Murelia must have sensed that Urslars and Fran were about to act, so why didn't she attack? What was she planning? I wanted to be careful, but we were running out of time.

Let's end this!

“Hm!”

Before we could move, a powerful wave of mana trembled through the ground under our feet.

That feels strange. What is it?

The dungeon shook to its roots, throwing everyone in the air—

even huge, heavy Urslars.

Was this some kind of earthquake? And, if so, why was Murelia smiling even more as we all got thrown around? Was she... had she been *waiting* for this to happen? But what was causing it? I didn't sense any Malice or mana beforehand. Had the dungeon caused it somehow? Either way, it had left us defenseless.

Careful, Fran!

Hm!

Air Hopping off the ground to stabilize herself, Fran set her gaze on our enemy. If Murelia was waiting for an opportunity to remove the only person with Fiend Crusher Revelation, this was it.

...

And yet, she didn't move. All she did was throw back her head and laugh.

“Aha ha ha ha ha! Finally! *Finally!!!*”

And she wasn't the only one acting weird. Urslars and Kiara were staring at Murelia in pure shock.

“Was that...the dungeon's cry?”

“If it was...why is she laughing?”

The dungeon's cry was an earthquake that happened when a dungeon was shut down, or when the dungeon master died. I hadn't noticed anything like it in the goblin dungeon of Alessa, but apparently, not all dungeons experienced it like this. The big earthquakes only happened in old and strong dungeons. But then... why was it happening here? Linford must have done a lot of work to strengthen this place.

Apparently, the mana that a dungeon core released just prior to the cry was unique. If you knew what to look for, you could see it coming. That must be the source of the mana surge I'd felt through the ground earlier.

So the dungeon master was dead? If that was so, then why was Murelia laughing? All of a dungeon's monsters are supposed to disappear when a dungeon loses its master. She was meant to be dead.

“Hee hee hee, and now I'm free!”

Urslars shook his head. “What? You said you were a creature of this dungeon. You should be...”

“Gone?” Murelia said happily.

“Yeah.”

“Well, too bad! Only half of me was made in this dungeon, so you’re not getting rid of me any time soon. I have a few more days left, at least.”

“That’s...not very much.”

“I suppose not. But it’s long enough to kill all of you.”

“You sound confident,” said Urslars.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be able to beat you,” Murelia said calmly. “After all, you do have a Godsword, and Fiend Crusher. Not to mention the fact that you’re all Evolved.”

What was she planning?!

“But I could just use the remainder of my power to blow us all to pieces. In fact, if I’m going to die anyway, then I may as well. Even if that doesn’t kill you all, I’m sure it’ll be enough to send the big guy over the edge.”

Even at half power, Murelia had a *lot* of Malice. If she chose to self-destruct, even Fiend Crusher couldn’t contain it all. She’d even foreseen that it would trigger Urslars’ Mad Ogre Form.

But why was she so desperate? It didn’t make sense. It sounded like she was expecting the dungeon master to die, but why wait for that, only to then kill herself?

“How about we make a deal?” Murelia asked.

“What?! ”

“Do as I ask, and I’ll let you kill me. Quietly. And with no tricks. I promise.”

Essence of Falsehood didn’t trigger, so she wasn’t lying. But it wasn’t enough to tell her true intentions. Did Essence of Falsehood work against Fiends? Identify didn’t, so maybe she was lying. After all, it was as natural to her as breathing.

Do you think she’s telling the truth, Fran?

Hm. I can see it in her eyes.

I see.

Fran was much better at reading people than me. I guess we had no choice but to trust her.

“What’s the deal?” Urslars asked. “Reviving the Evil One, I guess?”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Murelia. “I wouldn’t waste my time on such foolishness.”

“What...?! ”

Urslars was almost speechless. There couldn't be many Fiends out there who *didn't* want to revive the Evil One.

"I only ask for one thing," Murelia said. "And it should be easy enough for the likes of you."

"Go on..."

"There's a house in Basharl named Magnolia. I want you to get their newborn heir out of the kingdom and take him somewhere safe."

"What are you talking about?" Urslars asked.

Kiara looked just as surprised. "You want us to do what?!"

We couldn't believe our ears. What did the Magnolian heir have to do with any of this? I knew she'd promised Johann that she'd take his son out of Basharl, but she wasn't bound to that promise anymore, and she'd be dead in a couple of days.

Looking back, none of her actions made sense. She'd only entered into a deal with Johann so that she could use Magnolian blood to escape Linford's curse, but the old Fiendmancer was long dead now. She no longer needed Magnolian blood and had no use for Romeo, so why did she still care?

Didn't she want to use her freedom to wreak havoc on the Beastman Nation? Her entire campaign was focused on freedom and vengeance, and the only reason she even needed the Magnolias was to accomplish that.

Did she have other intentions that we didn't know about? Maybe she had plans for Romeo that went beyond the span of her own life. She did say that he was very strong, maybe even strong enough to free her from the dungeon, but that wouldn't be any use to her if she was already dead. Was she really prepared to give up her own life in the hopes we would save Romeo? I used Speed Thinking to push my thoughts to the limits, but I couldn't come up with a logical answer.

"Seriously," said Urslars. "What are you planning?"

Murelia tilted her head. "For once? Nothing. I'm asking you to take the Magnolian heir away from Basharl before he is enslaved to the throne, that is all. After that, he is free to live a normal life. I would suggest taking him to a neighboring continent. I hear there is an A-Rank adventurer who runs a good orphanage there."

"And you couldn't have done that yourself?"

"No. The dungeon master would have taken Romeo hostage if he found out about him. And, now that I'm free, I don't have enough time. You people are my last hope."

Kiara and Urslars fell silent.

Was she for real? Fiends were notorious for their wanton acts of destruction, but this one...wanted us to protect a *baby*?! And yet, I couldn't help but agree with Fran—it didn't feel like she was lying. Her eyes were convincingly honest.

"What about the other Magnolians?" Fran asked. "The knights?"

"Leave them. They are worthless next to Romeo."

"And what about your revenge? About taking back the throne?"

"Ha! You really think I care about that relic of the Krishnas? I only used my family name because it convinced the Basharlians to cooperate. I'll admit, when I first awakened, I wanted vengeance. When I met Johann and his family, I wanted it still. But it all changed the moment I saw Romeo. So innocent. Compared to him, the world is ashes and dust. I have done what I can to conceal my true intentions, as I never knew when the Basharlians or the dungeon master was listening. But I am telling the truth now. All I want is for Romeo to be safe and happy. Please, you must free him from the curse of the Magnolias."

"What are—"

But before Urslars could finish his question, someone else stepped in.

"Enough of this nonsense!"

"Gah!"

A shadowy figure emerged behind Murelia and stabbed her straight through the heart. Her Malice flowed to her attacker, and blood dripped out of her mouth. He was draining her power! Worse still, I remembered this man. The scar-covered warrior from Bulbola.

"Theraclede..." spluttered Murelia. "You...betrayed me...?"

"Kua ha ha! As if I would let a good meal go to waste!"

"Urgh..."

Theraclede tossed Murelia aside. By the time she hit the floor, she was almost dead. Her Malice was almost gone. She couldn't even heal herself.

"Please...make Romeo...happy..."

She reached out toward us with the last of her strength.

"Poor girl," Theraclede gloated. "I know Malice makes you crazy, but I never thought it would make a servant of the Evil One wish for the happiness of a child."

“Aah...”

Murelia’s hand fell limp and she crumpled to the ground.

It was a sad end for such a fierce enemy.

Aside: Murelia

THE LAST THING I remember is a blinding white light, as divine as it was dreadful. I had seen this light once before. The light of the gods' retribution.

It felt oddly nostalgic, as though I were back where I was five hundred years ago. And things had turned out the same now as they had then: I had failed.

I was so close to fulfilling my desire. My heart swelled with despair as I felt the Evil One tighten his grip on my soul, but a small ray of hope stopped it from swallowing me.

Linford told me that the Magnolias had survived. They even kept my name in their annals, even though their legends were so riddled with errors that it was almost laughable.

The love I'd felt for their ancestor had grown cold long ago. He abandoned me in my time of need, giving in to the demands of the beastmen, and I was never the kind of woman who could love a man despite his flaws. It was never love at all. I was just attracted to the power of his blood and wanted to keep this strange human for myself.

When I lost him, I'd lost all interest in the world. I lived a life of debauchery, but I would've been married off to a stranger if things had played out differently. It was all so pointless.

But then I found my lover's son. The boy he'd fathered with the slave girl they'd married him off to. In that moment, everything changed.

I hadn't known that I was capable of a mother's love. But the boy was so perfect that it felt like a command. I'd never felt this way for a child before. It was truly strange. His happiness became the only thing that mattered. He was the only reason I didn't kill his so-called family. As blind as I was with hatred, every child needs their parents. And so, I let the slave girl and her family live, if only so they wouldn't kill their child out of their fear of me.

Even so, things continued to get worse. My father was losing his wits, and the whole kingdom was outraged that I dared get engaged to a human. Our nation was close to civil war. That was when my father approached forbidden powers to secure his reign. He broke the seal on the Evil One's tomb, which had always been under our family's protection, in the hopes of securing his reign. And, since I was the one who'd brought our family into disrepute, I was the one chosen to be his sacrifice. And yet, I survived. I became a Fiend and gained powers

that I'd never even wanted.

Was I still myself then? Or was the Evil One pulling my strings? I didn't know the answer. All I knew was that I had power enough to fulfill my solitary longing.

Hesitation was futile at this point, so I acted: making a deal with my father to repeal the anti-human laws so the child could live in peace. After that, we began reforming the whole nation.

The other Black Cats had called me a filthy rat mere weeks ago, but they were lining up to shake my hand. It was ridiculous. The power from the Evil One had changed everything.

But, once again, I was betrayed. My former lover's family escaped to Basharl and was busily plotting against me. He even used his own son as hostage to gain leverage over me and, by extension, the whole of the Beastman Nation.

I had no choice but to comply. In exchange for the child's safety, I told them all about the beastman forces infiltrating Basharl and ordered our troops across the border to meet their doom. By this point, my father was completely brainwashed by the Evil One's power. I was free to claim whatever territory I wanted.

The anti-human party had been greatly diminished in the war, and I had offered their souls to the Evil One. I was at the height of my power. All I had to do was take that child back. My dreams of living with him in peace were about to come true.

That's when the light of divine retribution shone upon me. As punishment for using the Evil One's powers, I was killed and sealed away. At least I wasn't alone in that. Any Black Cat who'd been tainted with Malice joined me in death, and the survivors were stripped of their ability to Evolve. Given the way they had treated me, it seemed like the least they deserved.

Aha ha ha! And they say the gods aren't just! If anything, they were still too merciful. The Black Cats deserved to die. Every last one of them.

But that was that. At least until five hundred years later, when Linford awakened me and brought me under his control. It was humiliating to be under the sway of such a man, but he piqued my interest when he told me the child's bloodline still lived on in Basharl.

I would never see that child again. But what had become of his kin?

The Magnolias were descended directly from Linford, and indeed, they possessed the same power to command Fiends. It had

grown weak with time, but there was no denying their heritage. And yet, I felt a sense of foreboding as I travelled to see him. His power to command Fiends would surely cause him to reject me. The skill might even trigger without any ill will on his part. He would reject me, and that would be the end of the story. And yet, I went to see him anyway.

Romeo was nothing like the child I had known. He had different hair and different eyes, but the impact he had on me was the same. Romeo, the newborn heir to House Magnolia. Did I love him for the blood that flowed in his veins, or just because of his powerful ability to command Fiends as he wished? Either way, I loved him all the same.

That day, I gained a new purpose. I knew those Basharlian bastards would sacrifice him to revive the Evil One, and I could not let that happen. I was little more than Linford's servant, but I still had some degree of autonomy. And so, I carried out my wishes under the guise of fulfilling his.

The first thing I did was negotiate for Romeo's life with the Basharlian King and offer my services and cooperation in return. However, I knew that asking for Romeo directly would only mean they took him hostage. Instead, I told them that I needed Magnolia blood to summon the spirit of my dead lover, that an innocent soul would be best, and that a newborn would be best of all. I was quite pleased with that. It sounded like exactly the sort of thing that a priestess of the Evil One would say.

Of course, the king swallowed the whole thing, thinking me the mad specter of a woman scorned, who wanted nothing more than to sacrifice babies in my dark and twisted rituals. As far as I know, he still believes it. Either way, I had Romeo for myself.

The king wanted to conquer the Beastman Nation and free Basharl from the fear of invasion. He didn't care how it was accomplished, as long as it succeeded. Meanwhile, I made a deal with the Magnolias in secret. If the war against the beastmen failed, I would get Romeo out of the country. In return, Johann would sacrifice himself in his son's place. None of them knew my true intentions—they just thought I wanted to get my hands on Johann's blood. And just as well. I couldn't risk an information leak, not from anywhere.

Linford, Basharl, House Magnolia, and I all had our own goals. They just happened to intersect on attacking the Beastman Nation. That would give Linford his souls, give Basharl its victory, and ensure that Romeo was safe.

At first, it all went swimmingly. Basharl lured the beastman army south, leaving the north vulnerable to attack from the dungeon.

For a moment, it looked as though there would be no need to sacrifice Romeo. I would only need to claim him and get out of the country.

I even worked out a place to send him afterward. An A-Rank adventurer runs an orphanage in the neighboring continent. Try as I might to find a dark underbelly to it, I failed. She ran an honest orphanage, even in this day and age. Romeo would be far safer there than in the greatest fort in Basharl.

Then these freaks turned up with that meddling Godsword user, and I had to abandon my plans. I was still bound by Bolgarth's orders and couldn't get out of this battle if I tried. And so I would be forced to face Urslars and die in vain. My life was all over. Again.

Theraclede was my only hope. Somehow, he had betrayed Linford and consumed every Fiend in his path. He might be a traitor, but he was a useful one. And one that I could negotiate with. So I made him an offer: my life, and all the power he could gain from consuming it. In exchange, I made three requests.

First, he would kill Bolgarth and release me from the dungeon master's control. After that, I would be free to act in whatever way I chose, no matter how reckless. Urslars would still kill me, but at least my last few moments would be free from Bolgarth's prying eyes, and I could speak to the adventurers freely. I'd told them that I had a few days of life left in me, but that was a lie. At most, I had an hour. An hour that I couldn't spend with Romeo.

My second request was that Theraclede would intervene and kill me at the most opportune moment. He would do so just after I asked the adventures to look after Romeo. Why? Because people like them were weak. They wouldn't refuse a pitiful plea from the lips of a dying woman. I wanted to give Romeo the best possible chance of escape, and these adventurers were just powerful enough to pull it off.

As for my third request, well...I wasn't even certain Theraclede would bother with it. Either way, I did hope these adventurers managed to escape. They might be my enemies, but I trusted them with Romeo's life.

"Please...make Romeo...happy..."

"Poor girl," Theraclede gloated. "I know Malice makes you crazy, but I never thought it would make a servant of the Evil One wish for the happiness of a child."

Did these adventurers pity me? They had to.

"Ah..."

Thank you, Theraclede. You have been...a most unexpected

benefactor.

Chapter 5: Black Cats

“**P**oor girl,” Theraclede gloated. “I know Malice makes you crazy, but I never thought it would make a servant of the Evil One wish for the happiness of a child.”

“Aah...”

“Hmph.”

The giant man-Fiend lost interest in Murelia as she slowly melted away into a fine black mist.

What was going on? Did Murelia really just want us to save that child from Basharl? Had everything else been an attempt to cover her true intentions? The Krishna legend, her vengeance against the beastmen... was all of it a ploy? Johann said that the Magnolias possessed a rare skill that allowed them to control Fiends. As soon as Romeo came of age, Basharl would use him for its own ends. They may

even sacrifice him before that, and Murelia had known that it would be hard for her to save him with Linford and the dungeon master breathing down her neck.

But was she telling the truth? I mean, this was Murelia we were talking about.

Then Theraclede showed up and, before we could find out for certain, she was dead.

When the hell did he get here...?

The Malice coming out of Theraclede was even greater than Murelia's. When we'd met in Bulbola, I'd been able to Identify him, but not anymore. He didn't look much different, but he was more of a Fiend than before.

Urslars frowned and Kiara turned pale, backing off and readying her weapon. Goosebumps prickled down Fran's arms.

Theraclede was an anomaly *before* Linford transformed him into a Fiend, or the alchemist Zelyse operated on him and turned him into a Hellion. Of the many people Zelyse had experimented on, Theraclede was the only one to survive the crystal implantation. Now he had the power of that crystal *and* the strength of a Fiend besides. Even so, I never imagined he could become as strong as he was now.

Perhaps Cannibalize, the skill he'd acquired on becoming a

Hellion, had something to do with it. It allowed him to absorb the powers of anyone he killed, and the more Fiends he killed, the stronger he became. I didn't have a problem with him taking out more Fiends, but the fact he had become so strong in such a short amount of time was frankly terrifying.

"What are you?" Urslars asked.

"Name's Theraclede," the Hellion answered, shrugging off Urslar's waves of intimidation.

"You a Fiend?" Urslars asked. "Never seen anything like you before."

"It's a good question. Truth is, I'm not so sure myself. Old Linford stuck a Fiendstone in me, and that bastard Zelyse put a modified crystal right on top of that. But who cares what I am? That doesn't change how much fun I can have."

"So you're battle-crazy," said Urslars. "Makes sense. You *do* look strong."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Godsword user. Appreciate it. Ku ha ha ha ha!"

With every laugh, Theraclede released a great cloud of black Malice that exerted a physical force on us. This was terrible. It was really terrible. Murelia might be dead, but in her place was something even worse. We couldn't even press an offensive with Fiend Crusher Revelation. Urslars was probably only moments away from going berserk. The only option we had left was to get the hell out of here. Quickly.

Tch!

But my Dimension Gate was still refusing to work. Was Murelia's anti-warp barrier still active somehow? Or had Theraclede reapplied it? Either way, we were trapped.

"Hey," said Theraclede, turning on Fran. "I recognize you. You're the short one from Bulbola."

"..."

"How's that little puppy of yours doing? Hiding, is he? I promise I won't bite. Much."

Grrr...

Easy, boy.

Woof...

"..."

“What is it?” Theraclede asked. “Cat got your tongue?”

In truth, Fran couldn’t move a muscle. Not while Theraclede was staring at her like that. Jet was raring to go, but it was best for him to stay hidden for now.

Fortunately, Theraclede lost interest in Fran and turned back on Urslars, grinning like a madman. The sight was so disconcerting that Fran, Mea, and the others started shuddering.

“Godsword user, huh? Always wanted to fight one.”

“You think you have a chance?” Urslars asked.

“I might. Besides, it’ll be fun. You have the same condition I do, right?”

“Don’t compare us,” Urslars growled. “Although I doubt it would matter much to anyone caught up in it.”

“So that must make you really *really* strong, right? Ka ha ha! Nice!”

Theraclede identified Urslars as prey and started emitting a murderous aura. They were only exchanging words, but they might as well have been exchanging blows. Theraclede was deadly enough to give any normal person a heart attack.

Gwendartha fell to his knees, and the maids backed away until they hit the wall. They glanced at each other, surprised, as though they were retreating despite themselves.

“Tch.” Urslars clicked his tongue. “Come on, Kiara!”

“It’s no good!” Kiara called back.

She was trying to get the door open, but it was no use. And now Theraclede’s murderous aura was reaching its apex.

“Ready?” he asked Urslars.

“Hurry up, Kiara!” Urslars shouted. “And try not to die!”

The giants crashed together, and Theraclede made the first strike.

“Raaagh!”

Theraclede’s Fiendstone blade clashed with the Earth Sword Gaia. They were evenly matched. Considering Gaia’s name and power, it really was a fitting weapon for Urslars.

The pitch-black blade fell upon the rising Godsword and a shrill metallic ring echoed through the room, followed by a shockwave. Fran and the others had evacuated to the edge of the room, but they could still feel the pressure, even from there.

The two giants fought each other, throwing up shockwaves of rubble and dirt. Each strike was designed to kill. We needed to get out of here. I couldn't imagine how much power was between these two, but I had no intention of getting between them. I was pretty strong, but I'd get turned into scrap metal.

"Gaaaah!"

"Raaaaaah!"

Madness and Malice did their best to kill each other. They'd seemed like equals at first, but Urslars was the better swordsman. One in every five of his attacks hit the mark. Although Theraclede regenerated quickly, I could feel his Malice drop with every hit that Urslars landed. From the look of it, Godswords were pretty effective against Fiends too.

At this rate, Urslars just might have it. But Kiara was looking anxious. So was Urslars, for that matter.

"This is bad," the old cat muttered.

"What's wrong?"

"Look at Urslars' horn. See how it's getting redder? That's a warning sign. The Mad Ogre is coming."

This whole situation was going from bad to worse. Every time their swords clashed, Urslars' burned a little redder. Soon, crimson mana was roaring through his whole body.

"That red is wild mana," Kiara said. "The skill has triggered!"

Try as he might, Urslars couldn't delay Mad Ogre Form forever.

Even if the fight ended now, it would be too late. There was no stopping him.

He was in no condition to fight Theraclede to begin with, and now his sanity was slipping.

"Raaaagh!"

"Wooo!" Theraclede cheered. "No wonder you have a Godsword!"

Urslars attacks become more frantic and powerful. He slammed Gaia into the ground, and spidery cracks spilled out across the arena floor. Could he...destroy this dungeon? The floor of the goblin dungeon split when Fran attacked it, but it probably varied between dungeons. This one seemed unfazed by Urslars' rage. Cracks aside, his Land Spells and physical attacks didn't affect the terrain. Which meant that we may never find a way out of here if we couldn't demolish the dungeon to escape... but after everything we'd seen today, who knew

how much common sense applied? A single attack from Urslars was more powerful than all of our attacks put together. It was frustrating and, more than that, it was terrifying.

“Aaaaargh!”

“Raaaaah!”

The titans were on a rampage! Theraclede’s attacks added to Urslars’ destruction.

Gwendartha’s almost done for!

The rest of us were managing to avoid the shockwaves, but Gwendartha couldn’t keep up. Worse, the battle was only getting more intense.

I doubted Urslars even knew what he was doing any more. He and Theraclede were both using attacks that covered a lot of ground.

“Can you open it yet, Quina?!” Kiara asked.

The maid had taken over work on the door since Urslars went berserk but was forced to dodge the shockwaves every time they came our way. She was barely making any progress.

“I apologize. I’m not having much luck, and I have to keep stopping.”

“Mea, Fran, Mianoa. Cover her!”

We all threw up barriers around Quina and hoped that Gwendartha could look after himself for now. I never once took my eyes off Urslars and Theraclede. Their mana outputs were rising all the time! As I watched, Urslars skipped back and made a grand gesture.

“Uaaaaaagh!”

He pointed the Earth Sword Gaia straight up, and the smile vanished from Theraclede’s face. Whatever was coming, the Hellion was clearly worried about it.

“GODSWORD RELEASE!” Urslars shouted.

As soon as the words left his mouth, a wave of divine light burst from the sword. The Godsword’s mana engulfed Urslars, and he was swallowed up by a pillar of light.

“Urgh...”

The shockwave rattled the walls and threw out clouds of dust and rubble. It felt like we were standing next to a dynamite explosion. We couldn’t escape, the best we could do was hold our ground. Mana Sense and Presence Sense were useless. Powerful mana flooded the

room. Danger Sense wouldn't stop ping.

So, this is what a Godsword can do!

Urslars released his Godsword's power with that shout. He was only returning his weapon to its original form, but the mana output was insane! Could I really consider myself on the same level as this? I finally understood why the Godswords were feared as superweapons.

You all right, Fran?!

Hm!

The air was full of dust and we could barely see two feet ahead of us. There was no choice but to wait it out. A few seconds later, I felt an aura spill from the center of the dust cloud. It was Urslars. As the fog cleared, he was still the same as before, but the sword in his hand was utterly transformed.

Is that its true form...? It doesn't even look like a sword anymore.

It looked like no weapon I had ever seen. The simple two-handed sword now had a long, curved blade and five large spikes pointing inwards. The tip of the blade was twisted, and a huge lump of iron was attached to the end, giving it the appearance of a hammer crossed with a pickaxe. The hammer part was huge, and the thick blade was over two meters long—twice the height, width, and length of a barrel. It didn't look like something that could be wielded by a single person. It was more of a battering ram than a sword.

I Identified it, but the only thing I could see was its name, which had changed to Land Sword Gaia. With its true form unlocked, it was so powerful I couldn't even scan it properly.

Name: Land Sword Gaia

Attack: 4700

Mana Conductivity: SS +

Skill: —

That was all I could get. This weapon was literally beyond description.

“Uraaaaaah!”

Urslars lunged for Theraclede again. He was moving so fast now that I struggled to keep track of him. Somehow, Theraclede managed to keep up, but then I guess he was just as much of a monster as Urslars.

He raised his greatsword to block, but the Godsword easily

overpowered it. Theraclede tried to twist out of the way, but it was useless. He'd barely avoided the blade when an unseen force crushed half of his body flat. The ground beneath our feet rumbled. The remaining side of Theraclede's body struggled to keep its balance. That should have been enough to kill any man, but then Theraclede wasn't exactly human anymore. Before we knew it, the right side of his body regenerated and he was back on his feet.

"Holy shit!" He laughed. "Now *that's* a Godsword!"

This lunatic was battle-mad!

"Gaaaah!"

"Ha ha ha ha! Come on! I'll kill you and take that thing from you!"

Theraclede unleashed a powerful wave of Malice with every swing, and even a graze was enough to do damage. Every time Urslars struck out with Gaia, the whole dungeon shook. Fran wavered on her feet. Rubble scattered in every direction at sickening speed. It was becoming difficult to survive even *watching* this fight.

"Urgh...aaaarrrrrgggh!"

Their blades clashed again. This time, Urslars leaned into the strike, putting his body weight and all of his mana behind it. He was moving faster and faster.

"Tch!"

"Raaaaaagh!"

Before Theraclede could react, Urslars had a clean strike at him. He managed to throw up a barrier at the last second, but Gaia shattered it with ease. A huge explosion rocked the dungeon. Debris punctured my barriers and shrapnel was everywhere. Before I could equip Physical Immunity, Fran was hurt.

You okay?

Yes. Jet took the hit.

"Grr..."

Good job, boy.

The impact was greatly reduced by the barrier, and Jet had shielded Fran at the last moment. He suffered for it, but he looked quietly satisfied. I healed them both.

Back in the shadows, boy. How are the others doing?

"You guys all right?" Fran shouted.

"We're fine. But Gwendartha took the hit for us!"

“I’m coming over!” Fran called.

Gwendartha had covered everyone standing in front of the door. When we reached him, we found that his body was riddled with holes. His arms and legs were ripped to pieces, and he was losing a lot of blood. He was at death’s door.

Crap!

“Hm!”

Fran and I pelted him with Greater Heals and dragged him away from danger. Even so, he wouldn’t be moving for a while. A few more attacks like that and we’d all be joining him. I doubted the Godsword was even at full power yet.

Kiara turned to look back at the door. “Quina?”

“Sorry, I still can’t get it open.”

“I didn’t want to risk it,” Kiara said, looking back at Urslars. “But we have to do something about him.”

“What do you propose?” Quina asked.

“His berserk state deactivates if he takes enough damage.”

“So if we all attack him together...”

“But we’ll still be on the receiving end of his attacks if we fail! Like I say, it’s a risk.”

Too much of a risk, if it could bring that Godsword’s wrath down on us.

I had a better plan.

Fran, I’m going to try something.

Skill Taker...?

Yeah.

If I could take Mad Ogre Form away from Urslars, we might just have a chance. But this wasn’t without risks either.

First, we had no idea if Mad Ogre Form would deactivate once I removed it from Urslars. Second, it would make Urslars defenseless against Theraclede. Still, I had to give it a shot. We couldn’t go on like this. Not without getting someone killed.

“Let me try,” Fran said. “I can stop him.”

Kiara frowned. “What? How?”

“Well...”

Fran gave them the quick rundown, including the risk that *she*

might go berserk instead. We wouldn't know until we tried.

"But you don't know for sure?" Kiara asked.

"Hm."

"Do it. It's better than sitting here and doing nothing."

Kiara knew we were running out of time. Even Mea was having a hard time swatting away the debris now.

Here we go.

"Hm."

I pushed aside my nerves and focused on Urslars, finding my way onto his skill list.

Skill Taker!

I felt the invisible force tug at something inside of Urslars. A mysterious heat flooded my body.

"Graaaaaagh!"

I'd done it. Urslars stopped moving and started writhing in pain.

"Guaaaah!"

"What's up with you?"

Urslars fell to his knees, and Theraclede stopped attacking to see what was wrong. A few seconds later, Urslars went completely still.

"Something...happened..." he gasped.

But he didn't know what. He looked around just before his lights went out. Mad Ogre Form was gone, and Urslars was himself again. Kiara approached him cautiously.

Now you just need to unequip Mad Ogre Form, said Fran.

Yeah...

"Teacher?"

"Woof!"

Huh...?

"Te...er!"

What? Who was that? Oh, it was Fran. Of course it was Fran.

Eaaaaaaaaagh!

The urge to destroy suddenly rose within me. The world went red.

What was I doing?! Why was I just *sitting here* when my User was in danger? Why wasn't I *fighting*?!

There was an Ogre and a Fiend in this room. They were going to hurt Fran!

They had to die!

Fight! Destroy! Kill them all!

Haaaaaargh!

Fight!

Destroy Fran's enemies!

GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!

Mea

It all happened so fast.

Fran told us that she could seal Mad Ogre Form, and Master Kiara agreed to let her do it. Fran focused and readied her sword, and then Urslars just...stopped fighting. Somehow, Fran managed to pacify him. We'd all avoided death. Now we just had to deal with Theraclede.

I walked up to Fran. "You did it."

"..."

"Fran? What's wrong?"

"Teacher?"

"Woof!"

Huh...?

"Teacher! Teacher!"

Eaaaaaaaargh!

A telepathic scream rang on the inside of my head.

"Was that...Teacher?"

Before Fran could answer, her sword shot out of her hands and swept about the room, screaming like a wounded animal.

Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!

It fired a beam of light straight at Theraclede.

"What the hell is that?!" he said, looking surprised.

He dodged the lightning bolt, but the sword was already rushing in toward him.

Fran stood frozen in shock and white as bone. She wasn't in control. She hurried after the sword.

“Teacher!”

“She’s not controlling it!” I cried. “Teacher’s gone berserk!”

“What’s going on, Mea?” Master Kiara asked.

She had no idea what was happening, but she could see that something wasn’t right.

“Teacher...” I told her.

“What? You’ve never called me that before.”

“No, not you! It’s Fran’s Teacher!”

“What? What about them?”

Oh, no. She didn’t know about him. Should I tell her? Fran had entrusted me with this secret. I couldn’t just betray her.

“My lady,” Quina cut in. “Calm yourself. I apologize. She is just as confused as the rest of us.”

“Quina?” Kiara asked. “Do you know what’s going on?”

Quina shook her head. “I can only guess. It seems Fran’s sword has gone berserk, possibly as a result of stealing Sir Urslars’ skill. It must be a powerful enchanted blade to do such a thing.”

“I see,” said Kiara. “So it has Mad Ogre Form now?”

“I assume that is what’s happened, yes.”

Thank the gods that Quina was so quick on her feet! Unfortunately, Teacher was still raging.

Gaaaah!

He brought three thick pillars of lightning down on Theraclede. Three of them?! And each powerful enough to leave a crater in the dungeon floor. I broke out in a cold sweat. Those were *definitely* grand spells, and he fired off three at once? How powerful *was* this sword?!

“So now we have a crazy sword,” said Kiara. “It even has the same red aura as Urslars’ did!”

Even burnt to a crisp by lightning, Theraclede regenerated quickly. Still, he must be feeling the pressure now. I bet the last thing he expected was to be attacked by a rogue sword!

“Teacher!” Fran cried. “Teacher!”

She squinted against the dust and struggled to make it to the heart of the storm, but to no avail. Teacher ignored her and launched himself at Theraclede instead. The sudden acceleration caught the Fiend off guard. Before he could defend himself, half of his body was blown away.

“Aaaaaaargh! What the hell is this thing?!”

For the first time, Theraclede looked like he was in pain. Of course he was. That sword had Fiend Crusher on it. Teacher pressed the advantage.

UNLEASH POTENTIAL!

Mana tore out of him. It was so intense that the air shook. My skin prickled. The pressure coming out of Teacher was beginning to rival Gaia.

I ground my teeth in frustration. Why couldn't I get this kind of power out of Lind?

Ooooooooooh!

A giant magic circle appeared in the air and lightning came crashing through from above and from the sides, as three magic circles appeared on the walls and ceiling. More grand spells and, this time, Theraclede was surrounded.

“What are you up to?!”

I would have been toast by now, but Theraclede took the lightning head-on, and he kept coming—swinging his black greatsword in front of him to cut, scatter, and block. The battle was raging, and things were more intense now than they were when Urslars was fighting. Theraclede deflected lightning left and right with his sword, but it was all starting to feel so far away. My nerves were completely fried.

As I watched, Teacher's blade shattered and the pieces flew in every direction. I thought the intense mana had finally blown him apart, but in fact, he was transforming himself. A thousand needles shot toward Theraclede all at once.

Aaaaaaaah!

“You hunk of junk!”

The steel wires were closing in on Theraclede.

“Oooh, you've done it now!”

But somehow, he managed to warp away before he became a pincushion. He lost his right arm in the process, but Theraclede didn't seem too bothered by it. Still, Teacher soon hunted him down again, transforming his blade back to normal but leaving his ribbon as a hundred steel wires. Now he could shepherd Theraclede whichever way he wanted.

Just then, I felt a sensation like an ice cube slipping down my spine. Before I could work out what it was, Kiara threw us to the

ground.

“Get down!”

Skycutter.

The word was as quiet as it was terrifying. Teacher swung, slicing through everything in his path—cutting through Theraclede, Malice, mana, the air, the dungeon. Everything.

I looked up and saw deep gashes in the ceiling. I shuddered. If Kiara hadn't thrown me to the floor, I'd be decapitated by now, and I wouldn't even have noticed it coming.

“Gaaaaah!”

Theraclede was missing the whole lower half of his body, and he wasn't regenerating as quickly anymore either. He was more powerful and more monstrous than Murelia, but he was finally starting to show weakness.

I couldn't stop my hands from shaking. My heart was filled with fear.

This thing was no mere sword.

It was something else. Something more.

Alive.

Uraaaaaaagh!

“What now?” Theraclede shouted. “Haven't you done enough already?!”

Teacher was transforming again—his blade guard grew and spread upward, covering his blade with layers of metal.

“I won't let you have this one...!” Theraclede shouted.

He went on the offensive, focusing his Malice on his greatsword and bringing it down in a mighty strike. The attack was ten times more powerful than anything I could do, but it was turned away easily by Teacher's barrier.

Urgh... awoooooooo!

Teacher let out a mad howl, and I finally recognized the shape he was taking.

A wolf.

Five meters tall and made entirely of metal. The creature gave off pitch-black mana, mingling ominously with the red aura of Mad Ogre Form.

“It's Fenrir...” I whispered, before I could stop myself.

He looked just like the Demon Wolf in the fairy tales I'd heard as a child. The one that had tried to devour the world. He was quite as intimidating as his namesake too.

"It's open!" Master Kiara called from behind me.

While I was trembling with fear, she and Quina had kept trying the door. Finally, they'd found a way through.

"Come on," Master said, sounding happy. "We're getting out of here."

"Y-yes!"

"Mianoa, take Gwendartha. Quina, go get Urslars. I'll get Fran out of here."

She failed to give me an order, but then, I guess I was shivering too much to be of any use.

As I headed for the door, Quina pulled Urslars' arm over her shoulder and helped him up. But Theraclede had noticed what we were doing, and he wasn't about to let Master Kiara get away.

"Leaving already?" he asked. "But we barely even got to play!"

"Tch!"

There was no way she could get past him. Not with Fran in tow—motionless and pale with shock, still staring hopelessly at Teacher.

"Damn it!" I cursed.

"My lady!" Quina shouted.

She tried to stop me, but there was no way she could reach me in time. I didn't even know what I was doing, but I had to do *something*.

"Fran!" I shouted. "You have to come with me!"

"Mea...? But Teacher's..."

"I know, but we have to go!"

"No!" she shouted. "I'm not leaving him behind!"

"I know how you feel. Really, I do."

If that were Lind out there, I wasn't sure that I could leave him either. But that didn't change the fact we had to get away.

"Teacher isn't himself anymore," I told her. "He might attack you and not even realize it!"

"B-but..."

"That attack just now only missed because you got lucky, Fran!"

“...!”

“Come on!”

Fran hesitated, but she didn't stop me when I grabbed her arm and dragged her toward the door. But before we could reach it, the steel wolf's eyes turned on me. Suddenly, I couldn't move. All I could do was shiver under the weight of his murderous intent.

Aaaaaaaaargh! Fraaaaaaan!

He said Fran's name just then. Did he still recognize her? Maybe it wasn't just luck that she survived that last onslaught.

Groooooooooaargh!

Teacher roared, firing a beam of light from his maw. I drew Lind to defend myself, but I didn't think I could block the full force of the beam. I wasn't sure I could block it at all.

But somehow, I survived.

“Master Kiara...?”

She'd put herself between me and the attack.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Y-yes, but you're...!”

“Never mind me! You have to get out of here!”

“Y-yes!” I stammered. “Come on, Fran!”

It was like Master Kiara's words brought me back to life. I grabbed Fran's hand and ran towards the door.

Aside: Kiara

I THOUGHT WE WERE out of the frying pan, but we were immediately plunged into fire. Fran had lost control of her sword, and it was so powerful that we may as well have allowed Urslars to continue to rage.

If anything, this was worse. As crazy as Urslars was, he knew enough to make good combat decisions. Decisions that, for example, wouldn't bring the whole dungeon down on top of us. That was the only thing keeping us alive. That, and the fact the Godsword couldn't show its true power in this tight space.

This sword showed no such restraint. It could cast five grand spells at the same time, it used a Sword King Art, it could fly, it could change shape, and now it had the strength of Mad Ogre Form to boot. That last thing alone would have made it the finest enchanted sword in the world.

"And I doubt that's all I can do," I muttered to myself.

It may as well have been a Godsword. The steel wolf threw out powerful black mana, shot through with streaks of wicked red. I understood why Mea froze on the spot and whispered the Demon Wolf's name. She wasn't far off the mark. This thing was more powerful than any direwolf I'd ever encountered.

Groooooooooaar!

The shockwaves coming off it were so powerful that I had trouble keeping a grip on my sword. I was exhausted, and I had no way of launching a reprisal. Still, I couldn't give up just yet. The wolf wasn't my only opponent.

"You look ready to throw down, old lady," said the Fiend.

"I'm just buying some time for the children."

I didn't want to humor him, but I was afraid of what would happen if I didn't. There was no other way out of this room. I just needed to hold them off. I drew my sword and put myself between the Fiend and the doorway.

"You want to die?" he asked.

"Eh, I don't have much time left anyway. Might as well use what I've got for something useful, don't you think? Flashing Thunderclap!"

"Ku ha ha! I love a duel to the death, even with a weakling like you!"

Gaaaaoooo!

And so our battle began, and we all turned on each other.

Theraclede really did seem to be enjoying himself. Good. I could take advantage of that to buy more time. As long as I didn't collapse.

"But how long can I last...?" I wondered.

I had just recovered from an illness and I hadn't stopped fighting since last night. As much as I didn't want to admit it, I couldn't keep this up for long. If only I could somehow kill them both with a single attack...

Grrr...

"Let's see..."

But there was nothing I could do. Theraclede had survived the wrath of a Godsword, and I didn't even know how to *begin* to kill an animated metal wolf. Whichever way you cut it, the odds were against me. So, what now?

"Haa...!"

"You've got great moves for an old lady!"

Grooooooar!

I had no choice but to attack Theraclede, but it meant turning my back on the wolf. I barely avoided the wolf's attacks while locking Theraclede down with my lightning and my sword.

Sweat trickled down my back. How could a wolf use its tail like a whip?! If I wasn't Awakened, it would have taken my legs off. As it was, the attack struck Theraclede instead, just as I'd planned. I could feel the Malice leaking from the flesh wound. Whatever had happened to that sword, it still had Fiend Crusher on it.

"This can work," I muttered.

It had to. It was the only shot I had. I still had no idea how to deal with the wolf, but I'd have to cross that bridge when I got to it.

"Don't think I'll fall for that cheap shot again," Theraclede growled.

"No? Well, we'll see about that."

I jumped away, putting everything into speed and evasion. My brain spun frantically, reading Theraclede's movements and trying to keep an eye on the wolf while I baited them into each other. Both of them were focusing their attacks on me now, but what of it? I didn't make it this far in life by giving in to despair. And besides, the situation wasn't hopeless yet.

I managed to dodge all of the wolf's attacks, but Theraclede

wasn't finding it so easy.

"Tch!"

After suffering enough damage, he jumped away to catch his footing. But I wasn't about to let him get away. I chased him down with the full speed of a Black Sky Tiger, with the metal wolf hot on my heels.

"You old bitch!"

Groooooar!

"Mwa ha ha ha!" I laughed. "Come now, Fiend! What happened to your confidence?"

I danced through the pain, pushing my body to its limits. Each step cost me a minute of my life. I was as fast as Theraclede, but I was weaker than him and had no way to regenerate. I was no match for the wolf. I shouldn't even be on my feet, but there were a few things keeping me in the fight for now.

First, Theraclede was humoring me. He lived for the thrill of the fight and was still fooling around. Next, the wolf was fast, but it lacked the control to be truly agile. It was even somewhat clumsy. But the most significant reason I was still fighting was my experience. My enemies were naturally powerful, even excessively so, but they relied too much on their instincts and lacked the wisdom to know when to strike.

My experience meant that I could read their movements. I could see when they were going to attack. All I had to do was adapt to it. Granted, that took every ounce of my agility and attention, but it was also keeping me alive.

"Yaaaargh! Just die already, you hag!" Theraclede growled.

Graaaaargh!

"Hmph..."

I was almost spent, but neither of them showed even the slightest sign of exhaustion. It was frustrating, but I couldn't let up now. If I did, I'd be dead in a second. Such was my current circumstance.

"Huff huff..."

"Breaking a sweat, old lady?" Theraclede asked.

"It's hard work holding myself back for you young folks," I teased.

If I could make him angry, I could keep his attention on me for long enough for the others to escape. I dug deep, forcing the last of

my mana down into my legs, my lungs, my failing heart. My body was at breaking point, but I couldn't let it fall.

As I struggled to stand upright, the wolf was falling apart.

Gaaaaah!

It howled in pain and slumped to the ground. It wasn't that it slipped or lost its balance. Rather, its metallic body simply crumbled into sand.

What was happening to it?

Theraclede and I both jumped away from it to watch. The creature was barely even a wolf at this point. Most of its body had disintegrated, leaving only a few fragments of metal.

It continued disintegrating, faster and faster, until only Fran's sword lay in its place. There were cracks all over its blade. The red-and-black aura around it had melted away, and its Godsword-like power was a distant memory. There was no trace of mana coming out of it at all. It was probably dead.

One down, one more to go. But as I turned back to Theraclede, he rolled his eyes and lowered his guard.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Uh, this is boring. The sword's done for, and you're about to kick the bucket. Might as well go find those lively little—"

"I'm not dead yet, dammit!"

"Oooh, I stand corrected. But you're slower than you were, old lady."

Of course I was slower! I was in excruciating pain and my legs weren't working like they were meant to. I barely had any life left in me, but I couldn't let this bastard through. Never mind the future of the Black Cats or the whole of the Beastman Nation—Fran's life was at risk! We may not be related by blood, but I would not let this bastard hurt my granddaughter!

...?

"Huh?" I looked around. "Who was that?"

Kiara...

A voice. Telepathy? But who was it coming from?

Who are you? I asked.

I'm Teacher. This is...the first time we've talked. But I know a lot about you. More than you know about me.

How? I asked. *Where are you?*

Right in front of you. See that sword? That's me.

What?!

An Intelligent Weapon?! That would explain how Mad Ogre Form could make a sword go crazy like that. I never thought I'd meet a legendary weapon, let alone when I was at death's door.

Thank you for speaking to me telepathically. I'm too tired to move my lips.

Kiara, you need to turn off Flashing Thunderclap right now or...

No. The second I turn it off, he'll cut me to pieces.

But you'll die if you don't!

That's fine by me, I said. As long as I can hold him off.

But you'll break Fran's heart! the sword begged.

But I was going to die, and what a relief that I wouldn't be leaving Fran on her own.

I wasn't worried for Mea. She had Quina and that impudent brat, Rigdith, who'd somehow become a loving father.

But Fran? The other Black Cats would never be good company for her. I'd thought my death would condemn her to solitude. It was good to know I was leaving her with a friend. I may only just have started speaking to this sword, but I could already tell it cared for her. Fran wouldn't be alone. She wouldn't have to shoulder her burdens all by herself.

I could die without a care in the world.

Been a fighter all my life. Won't you give me the dignity of a fighter's death? I asked.

Kiara...

Please.

All right, the sword agreed. Then we'll have to use what's left of your life to beat Theraclede.

Heh. Sounds splendid. What's the plan?

First of all...

I could barely move. There were so many cracks in my blade, and I didn't have enough energy to regenerate them. I couldn't use Telekinesis either, but at least the fog had finally lifted from my mind. Enough that I could assess the situation.

I had faint memories of what happened. I remembered taking

Mad Ogre Form from Urslars and firing off multiple Kanna Kamuys. I'd transmogrified myself and used Unleash Potential. I'd fought better than I ever had. Despite driving you crazy, Mad Ogre Form retained all your combat sense.

After that, everything got a little hazy. I cut up Theraclede and then...what? I think I unleashed a great amount of power. Something inside me had urged me to transform into a wolf, but that same something had fought for control of my body the whole time I was in that form. It made it difficult to control.

The next thing I knew, my blade was broken and I was lying on the floor. I must have spent too much time in Unleash Potential and completely wrecked my durability. Somehow, the damage freed me from Mad Ogre Form. Now I had less than a hundred points of durability left, and so little mana that I couldn't even regenerate. That wasn't a problem in itself, but Kiara was still fighting Theraclede, and she wasn't looking good. She'd been in Flashing Thunderclap for too long and was getting close to death. I tried to warn her with telepathy, but...

Gaah!

Pain rushed up my blade. I couldn't understand it. It wasn't a physical pain, but I must have pushed myself beyond my limits. I must be in more trouble than I thought, but this was no time to hesitate. Pain or not, I had to contact Kiara. But when she responded, it sounded like she had already made up her mind.

Been a fighter all my life. Won't you give me the dignity of a fighter's death?

Kiara...

Please, she said.

There was no way I could make her turn off that skill, and even if I could, it would be an insult to her.

All right. Then we'll have to use what's left of your life to beat Theraclede.

Heh. Sounds splendid, Kiara said. What's the plan?

First of all, pick me up. But don't equip me. If anyone who isn't Fran tries to equip me, a great curse falls on them.

I tried to move closer to her, but I was a wreck. Telekinesis just wouldn't work. Even if I forced myself to move, I didn't have enough to attack Theraclede. I'd probably break before I even got off the ground. That's why I needed Kiara's kelp. If she could get me to Theraclede, I could use the last of my energy to strike.

Wait for an opening, I said. Then throw me right at him.

That's it? she asked.

Yeah.

Got it!

I couldn't use any of my powers, and Kiara was half-dead. This was our only chance.

Let's do this!

Kiara was still fighting, but she managed to snatch me up off the ground. Immediately, Theraclede took a step back. He'd already tasted the Fiend Crusher on my blade.

"You sure about that, old lady? I doubt a busted sword with no mana will help you now."

It was a fair point, but Kiara only laughed in response to his taunting. It was the only thing that she had enough strength for. She gathered the last of her energy and charged toward him.

"Haaa!"

"Hah!" Theraclede laughed. "I didn't think you could still move!"

He'd underestimated her. Powerful Fiends like him could barely feel pain, and he seemed to have bottomless energy. His race defied classification. He could probably recover some strength through his crystal, even with depleted Malice. He was in no danger here. This fight was just a game, but that was his one weakness. We could exploit it.

"Black Lightning Strike!"

"What...?!"

Wow!

That was so good that even Theraclede was surprised. Kiara staggered toward him, swinging wildly. She looked desperate, but it was a feint. As Theraclede casually raised his sword to block, she switched behind him with Black Lightning Strike. He was so shocked that it took him a moment turn around, and by then, it was too late. She'd already thrown me right at him.

Now it's your turn! she told me.

Aaaaaaaaah!

I used the last of my strength to Transmogrify. I pictured myself as a thousand vicious needles, but in the end, all I could muster was ten of various shapes and sizes. It wasn't even enough to pierce

Theraclede's skin. Still, I did my best to snarl around his legs.

Damn it! I needed more power! Thinner! Sharper! Stab him dead!

In the end, I only managed to pin down his right leg.

But I'm not letting go!

"Aaargh! This damned sword again?! Wait, what was that voice?"

Eeeergh...! Aaaaargh!

I screamed at him telepathically. Everything hurt so much that I couldn't stop myself, but it didn't matter. Nothing did. I wasn't about to let this chance slip by. I had to finish this! I forced myself to transmogrify further.

Are you all right? Kiara asked.

Urgh...I'm...fine...

You don't sound fine!

I said I'm fine!

Keeping up telepathic communication was getting hard.

"Get off me, you piece of scrap!" Theraclede roared.

Gah!

He reached down and grabbed hold of me, wrenching me this way and that to try and pull me away.

Aaaaaaargh!

"Let go of me, you bastard!"

Not happening!

Kiara stood motionless and stared as Theraclede struggled and screamed. I couldn't let him go. If I let him go, all of this was for nothing.

But then, someone entered the room.

"Teacher! Kiara!"

Fran?! Why are you...?!

"I heard you screaming," Fran shouted. "I couldn't leave you! Or Kiara!"

"Teacher!" Kiara yelled. "Keep him occupied!"

What?

I'm going to use my trump card, she explained. It will take a lot of

my life energy, but that hardly matters now.

No! But that would mean you...!

I know this old body best, said Kiara. I have less than a week left anyway. At least allow me a warrior's death. I want to die in a blaze of glory.

Kiara stomped her feet. Her eyes were hazy and unfocused, but full of determination.

You know what sets us apart from the animals? Kiara asked. Our passion. We're full of it to bursting.

Watch your right flank, I warned her. He's coming.

Hah! You're a good man. Or sword. Whatever you are, take care of Fran for me.

Black lightning crackled down Kiara's sword as she swung at Theraclede. Her pupils narrowed to feline slits, and her white hair turned completely black. Power surged through her, but I could feel her life force draining away, but I couldn't stop it. All I could do was hold Theraclede in place.

"Haaaaa! Black Lightning God Claw!"

Blades of shadowy lightning burst from her hands. But it wasn't simply a convergence of energy like Mea's Golden Flame of Annihilation. Her black blade had a divine energy. The mana was completely different from anything I'd seen her use before.

It wasn't like her sword was covered with Malice, spreading fear and dread. The black lightning looked sacred. All I could do was stare at her in awe.

Theraclede sensed the danger and tried to wrench himself away.

"What are you doing...?!"

"Yaaaah!"

Kiara lunged for him, but her swing was slightly misjudged. Her legs were giving out underneath her. I had to do something. I pushed outward with the last of my Telekinesis, correcting the path of her attack.

That did it. Theraclede had expected the attack to miss, so Kiara took his left arm clean off.

"Gyaaaa!"

He screamed and struggled, but it was useless. Theraclede's Malice dropped like a stone, and that wasn't all.

"Wh-why can't I heal?!"

He stared at the stump of his left arm, but it refused to regenerate. The bleeding stump was sanctified. Clean of Malice. Kiara's Black Lightning God Claw hurt him more than even Fiend Crusher Revelation ever could.

"Aah..."

Satisfied with her work, Kiara collapsed. I tried desperately to heal her, but I didn't have anything left. All I could do was lie there like a useless lump of metal while Fran stood horror-struck.

"Teacher! Kiara!"

Never mind me!

"Guoooooooo!"

Theraclede glared at us, but his hatred had lost its bite.

"What was that?!" he demanded. "That divine element... I guess the stories about beastmen being descendants of the Godbeast are true after all. You win this round, but I'll be back. Tell that old hag that she beat me fair and square! Aaaargh!"

And with that, he ran away. Good thing too. If he'd have fought for his life, I doubt Fran could have held him off.

Kiara? I asked.

She wasn't moving.

Teacher...we did it...

Yes, but at what cost...?

A good one, said Kiara. *I got the chance to use all the powers of a Black Sky Tiger. It was one hell of a fight to die for.*

A blaze of glory, I said. *Just like you wanted.*

Heh heh. Thank you. Best compliment I've ever had...

Fran rushed to her side.

"Kiara! Kiara!"

"Hello, Fran..."

"Hang in there. I'll heal you!"

"Save your mana, sweetheart..."

Fran ignored her, pelting Kiara with Greater Heals, but it was too late. She was beyond healing, and there was no bringing back the dead. It was a miracle that she could even talk.

"We only spent...a short while together," Kiara croaked. "But I loved...every moment..."

“Kiara!”

“You are...like a granddaughter...to me...”

“Please...don’t...”

“Don’t waste your time...on something stupid...like revenge.”

“I-I won’t.”

“Get stronger...but get kinder too. Live with passion...be free...”

She sighed and the last of her life leaked out. Her body went limp, and her eyes drifted peacefully closed.

“Kiara?”

“...”

“Kiara!” Fran shouted.

But Kiara remained silent. There was a peaceful smile on her lips, as the greatest hero of the Black Cat Tribe went to the great beyond in the arms of her adopted granddaughter.

“Urrgh... aaaah...”



Tears poured down Fran's face and dripped down onto Kiara's clothes.

Fran buried her face in Kiara's bosom like a child and cried.

"Waaaaaah!"

Fran pulled Kiara's body against her. Her heart was torn to pieces. I'd never seen her like this before. I couldn't shed tears, but the pain was still there. I would have liked to spend more time with Kiara, and now I never would.

"Arf..."

"Urgh..."

Jet sat down next to Fran and whined. He didn't try to lick away her tears, but he lent her his warmth, looking as downcast as the rest of us. He must have grown much closer to Kiara while we weren't looking. As we grieved, the others came back into the room, and they'd brought a mysterious woman with them.

Who was this person? I couldn't identify her, even if I wanted to. The others must have come back for Fran. They scanned the room, and the blood drained from their faces as they saw Kiara lying on the ground.

"Master Kiara!"

"Madam Kiara!"

Mea and Mianoa immediately rushed to her side. Mea was always fiery, but I had never seen Mianoa look so flustered before. Gwendartha was still shouldering an unconscious Urslars, but he and Quina looked equally shocked. As soon as they saw Fran and Kiara, they all knew what had happened. They could only watch as Fran desperately tried to heal the old Black Cat and then resigned herself to tears.

"Fran..."

"Mea..."

"Did you talk to Master Kiara?" Mea said quietly.

Tears were still streaming down Fran's face.

"Master liked you," Mea said. "She never had her own family, but I think that's how she thought of you. Did she say anything?"

"She said...to be kinder...to live with passion. Be free."

Mea smiled sadly. "That's just like her."

Mea probably wanted to start bawling on the spot, and the others must feel the same. Gwendartha rubbed his reddened eyes and

Quina bit her lip.

“Be free, Master Kiara,” said Mea. “You never got much of that in life, thanks to my rotten grandfather.”

That’s right. The previous Beast King was the one who turned Kiara into a slave. I’d forgotten that he was Mea’s grandfather.

“She looks so peaceful now,” Mianoa whispered through her tears.

She’d been Kiara’s personal attendant for so long that they were almost family themselves. Mea rubbed her bloodshot eyes and got up, letting the maid do her work one final time. Fran, realizing that she wasn’t the only one feeling sorrow over Kiara’s death, stood to join her.

“Thank you,” said Mianoa.

She knelt down beside Kiara, took a clean white handkerchief, and wiped the dirt off her face.

“Madam Kiara...I always loved it when you smiled...”

Kiara was smiling with full satisfaction. She probably couldn’t feel anything after unleashing her final attack. She couldn’t see Theraclede and couldn’t see how her attack missed, or how I had to correct it.

Even so, she knew that she had done it. That Fran was safe. That smile of hers seemed indestructible.

If I were in her place, could I have done the same? I didn’t think so. I’d probably fight for my life and cry desperately for Fran.

Kiara’s life had been a long one, filled with good and bad. She had friends to fight beside and drink with, she’d won great victories, she’d suffered hardships, and that didn’t even scratch the surface of it all. She’d lived a life too full for a thirty-something punk like me to eulogize her.

With everything she’d done, was it any wonder that she went out with a smile?

I couldn’t have done it. Not yet. But even in death, Kiara inspired me. I wanted to live a life like that and leave this world with a smile. And for that to happen, I needed to figure out how to fix myself. And yet, try as I might, I couldn’t get my broken pieces back together. Every time I tried, the pain almost tore me apart.

Argh...!

What was wrong with me? I couldn’t even get Self-Repair to work.

That was when the mysterious woman approached me, as everyone else was gathered around Kiara. She had long blonde hair and was wearing a flowing white robe, but her eyes were sharp. Almost mean. It felt like she was angry for being left behind. Her figure was slender but toned. She wasn't an ordinary woman.

She inspected me carefully, her right eye peeking out from behind her bangs. Should I do something? I guess she wasn't an enemy, but I needed to stop her from equipping me, if only for her own good. As much as I wanted to respect Fran's grief, this could become a problem.

Urgh...Fran...

Hm...?

This woman...

I could barely talk. Without the rush of battle to dull the pain, I was fading fast. Fran happened to look at me and the woman and knew that I had something to tell her. She rubbed her eyes and came toward me, picking me up before the woman could.

Teacher...are you okay?

Yeah...

I mean, I wasn't sure if that was true, but what else could I tell her? I couldn't even regenerate mana. Would the Godsmith be able to fix me? They'd better. I couldn't do a thing in this state, and Fran had just lost someone important. I needed to be there to support her!

"Umm..."

Although she was only getting her own property, Fran knew that it was rude to grab me when this woman was looking at me. She started talking to the woman but hesitated. If anything, the woman was staring at her too.

"You the sword's owner?"

"Hm."

The woman's voice was absolutely calm.

This lady really didn't seem to be in a good mood, but at least she didn't interrupt the others while they were crying.

"I see," she said. "Show it to me?"

Teacher? Fran asked.

How should I handle this? We still didn't know who she was, but if we refused, she might get even angrier. And I didn't want to interrupt Mea and the others while they were grieving. Did I still have

Fake Identity at this point?

“It’s all right,” Mea said.

From the tone of her voice, it sounded like she respected this woman. As though they were familiar with each other, at least.

“Lady Alistaire means no harm. She takes care of Lind from time to time.”

And Lind was a verified Godsword... Mea must really trust this woman if she trusted her with him.

Should I? Fran asked.

Go ahead.

It would be rude to refuse now. And if this woman could run maintenance on a Godsword, then she must be quite the smith. Although that still didn’t explain what she was doing here.

“Hm.” Fran held me out in front of her.

“Thanks.”

The woman’s stoic demeanor really fitted the image of a blacksmith. Alistaire looked me over, paying special attention to my pommel and blade guard.

“This design must be...” She shook her head. “But the shape of the guard...do you mind if I take a closer look?”

“Hm.”

“Excuse me, then. Parsesight!”

Mana gathered in Alistaire’s eyes, powerful enough to light up the darkness. She studied me again and, this time, she couldn’t hide her surprise.

“That’s...quite the user restriction. And there’s...a divine seal on it? Did the gods actually...? Wh-who made this absurd sword? A godsmith?”

“What’s wrong?” Fran asked.

“I cannot say it out loud yet,” said Alistaire.

Judging by her reaction, she had some kind of identification ability. She could see my skills and stats, and had probably figured out I was an Intelligent Weapon too.

“Either way,” she said, “its mana circuits are a mess and will likely stay that way unless it gets fixed up.”

Fran blinked. “Wh-what should I do?”

“Hang on. I’m going to touch you, all right?”

“Hm.”

That was *definitely* directed at me. She knew what I was.

Alistaire reached out and touched my hilt with her slender fingers. Almost immediately, mana flowed into my body. It was a warm, comfortable sensation. Like getting a good round of maintenance.

Ahhhh...

It felt like my wounds were closing up. Like she was healing me, right to my core. Even so, Self-Repair *still* didn't engage. The damage must be much worse than I thought. At least we could trust this Alistaire woman. I couldn't help myself now. I was always weak to the gentle touch of a woman.

Teacher? Fran asked.

I'm fine.

It didn't even hurt so much to use telepathy anymore. Alistaire must have done something to me. Who was she?

“I've applied some emergency repairs,” she said. “It won't get worse, as long as you don't push it, but absolutely *no fighting* until it's been fully repaired.”

“So...you can fix it?” Fran asked.

“Of course. Never met a sword I couldn't fix.”

“Really?”

“Really,” said Alistaire. “It'll be fine.”

“Thank the gods!”

Fran sighed with relief and hugged my hilt. Tears trickled down her face. She'd already lost Kiara, and now I was badly damaged. She'd probably been thinking the worst. She must have realized how much of a state I was in, even if I didn't.

Sorry for scaring you, Fran.

It's all right. I'm just glad you're going to make it.

I still couldn't use Telekinesis, so I kept apologizing. It was the only thing I could do.

“Lady Alistaire,” said Mea. “Will you repair the sword for Fran?”

“Of course. Although it depends on whether this girl agrees to it or not.”

Mea nodded. “You should let her, Fran. An opportunity like this doesn't come along every day.”

Despite her own grief, Mea was still looking out for me and Fran. Her compassion truly marked her as royalty.

Should we let her? Fran asked.

Yeah, we should...

I was already feeling a lot better. Whoever this Alistaire was, she was good. And Mea was vouching for her, too.

“Hm. Please fix it.”

“My pleasure,” said Alistaire. She turned her attention on Mea. “So what will you do now?”

“Well...”

Mea looked down at Kiara’s body. She was the one who’d brought us all together, and now she was gone. Mianoa was exhausted, Quina was just a maid, and Gwendartha still had so much to learn. We could ask Urslars to lead us when he woke up, but right now he was no use, and Fran definitely wasn’t the one to lead our party. Mea was the only one who could pull us all together, and she knew it. She rubbed her swollen eyes and lifted her chin.

“First,” she said, “we’ll make sure the dungeon master is actually dead. Then we’ll destroy its core.”

“Are you sure?” Quina asked. “This is quite a strategic dungeon.”

Mea nodded. “A dungeon spread out over two countries is nothing but trouble. If we leave it, wars will be fought over it forever.”

Both countries would want control over it, and the fact that this dungeon had already been used in the war would only make things worse. Unless both parties could work out how to share the dungeon, more war was inevitable. Relations between Basharl and the Beastman Nation would only deteriorate when they found out what happened here. Mea was right. We had to destroy it.

“I know I should think of ways to use it for the good of our country,” Mea said. “But...”

“No, my lady,” said Quina. “I completely agree.”

Knowing Rigdith, he’d probably agree too. I could imagine him saying something like “Screw it, let’s blow it up. It’s just gonna give me headaches.” In any case, Mea was set on this course of action now. There was no hesitation in her eyes.

“Quina and I will see to it,” said Mea. “Lady Alistaire, will you lead everyone else out of the dungeon?”

“After seeing this sword you’ve introduced me to? Sure. I’ll take

care of them until we're out. You don't mind if we head on to my mansion from there?"

"Not at all," said Mea. "We'll see you there if we take too long."

"And then what?" Alistaire asked.

"While Fran goes with you to repair her sword, I'll take the others back to Green Goat, and then on to the front," said Mea. "We're still fighting a war. That is...if that's okay with you, Fran?"

"Hm..."

Fran nodded reluctantly. I could feel how badly she wanted to fight alongside Mea, but she also knew I'd be useless without these repairs.

I'm sorry, Fran.

It's okay. You're more important.

"Right, then," said Alistaire. "What about this hulking Ogrekin? Should I take him with me?"

It sounded like she knew Urslars. She wasn't close, but she was close enough to be familiar. Mea thought about it for a moment and then bowed her head.

"Please."

"Very well, then."

Alistaire took Urslars from Gwendartha and threw him easily over her shoulders. It seemed impossible. Just how strong was this woman?!

"We need to leave," Mea said. "But we should give Master Kiara a proper burial. If not now, then when all this has settled down, right?"

"Yes..."

"Fran," said Mianoa. "Could you take care of her for us?"

"Of course."

Fran took Kiara's body and stored it inside her Pocket Dimension. It made me a little uneasy, seeing her remains treated like any other object, but no one else seemed troubled.

I guess the people of this world lived with death every day. The average corpse might turn into an undead if left alone, after all. They also believed that the soul departed at death, so it was natural for them to pay less attention to the body.

We prepared to leave the dungeon after that, and Fran led the way to the exit with Jet at her side. We were exhausted, and I

expected it to take a while, but the lack of monsters made the journey much easier.

I took the opportunity to do some diagnostics along the way. I was still Skill Sharing with Fran, so that was a spot of sunlight in the fog. But my mana reserves were completely shot and that was a real worry. Fran was our only source of mana. We'd have to be careful.

As we reached the halfway point, the dungeon began to shake. I guess Mea and Quina had succeeded in destroying the core. They caught up with us just as we reached the exit and confirmed that it was done. The dungeon master was already dead when they reached him. All that was left now was an empty underground complex.

"I guess it's goodbye for now," said Mea, looking a little sad.

"Hm." Fran nodded reluctantly.

They had already lost Kiara. Now they had to leave each other.

"We've been through a lot together," said Mea. "I'll see you again soon."

Fran nodded. "Good luck..."

"Thank you."

Mea and the others were headed to the front line. The Beastman Kingdom was still at war with Basharl. They didn't know what awaited them, but it couldn't be worse than what we'd just faced. Basharl had to retreat. If they didn't, Kiara's death would've been for naught. Mea seemed to understand that.

"We shall pray for Teacher's quick recovery. I hope you don't mind taking care of Master Kiara a little while longer. We will hold a funeral for her as soon as we can."

"You got it."

They were close enough that they could hug each other, but they shook hands instead—each giving words of encouragement as they looked sternly into each other's eyes.

"I'll be seeing you."

"Hm!"

Mea's small shoulders carried the weight of being both a princess and a disciple of Kiara's. Regardless, she smiled regally as they let go of each other.

Mea got into the carriage, and Fran watched as it faded into the distance.

We'll see her again soon.

“Hm.”

Epilogue

AS MEA'S GOLEM carriage sped away, Alistaire glanced down at a lonely-looking Fran.

"We should get going," she said. "And I should probably introduce myself."

"Hm."

"My name is Alistaire. Godsmith. Nice to meet you, Black Lightning Princess and Intelligent Weapon."

I'd suspected that Alistaire was a godsmith ever since Mea said that she trusted her with Lind. And besides, I was far too exhausted to be surprised at this point. Seemingly, Fran felt the same way. She raised her eyebrows slightly, then introduced herself.

"Black Sky Tiger Fran. C-Rank adventurer."

And I'm Teacher...

"Woof!"

"And this is Jet."

Alistaire tilted her head. "Did you give Teacher his name?"

"Hm."

"So he's not a Named Item... is it possible for an item without a name to be so powerful?"

Really powerful items were named by the gods. Apparently, Named Items were even more powerful than Class items. I was powerful enough to be counted among them, but not enough to go around claiming the gods' favor.

"Anyway," said Alistaire, "we'll head to my mansion. I can analyze and repair Teacher there."

Please.

"Thank you," said Fran.

"Don't mention it. Working on such a splendid sword is reward enough. Hop in."

Alistaire reached into her item pouch and took out a golem carriage similar to Quina's. As we got in, Alistaire threw Urslars' unconscious body on the floor.

"Will he be okay?" Fran asked.

"The big lug's gone through worse. Besides, I'm not going to sit

him up just so he can fall on his face again.”

She didn't seem to like him very much. I wonder what happened between them? I guess we'd have to wait for Urslars to wake up.

“And away we go!”

And with that, the carriage sped away to the Godsmith's mansion.

Bonus Story: Fran and Cooking

H*acchacha~ Tatata~*

“?”

“Arf?”

Nananana~

“Teacher?”

Dadadadada~

“What’s gotten into you?”

“Woof.”

This is a ritual to make delicious food.

“Uh-huh.”

I had to admit I was in a very good mood today. To think that Fran would actually ask me to teach her how to cook! I was so happy to see how much she’d grown!

Welcome back to the Restaurant to Another World! Thank you, you’re too kind!

“Wow.”

“Aroo.”

Fran applauded. Jet did the same, slapping the ground with his tail in order to clap. We had traveled many miles together, and it was nice of them to play along with my shenanigans.

On today’s menu, we have—

“Curry?”

Not quite!

“... Oh.”

“... Ruff.”

Fran flopped her ears and Jet tucked his tail, dismayed to hear their favorite dish wasn’t on the menu. They were so cute. But I digress.

But not to worry! We can have yesterday’s curry later!

“Really?”

Yes, really.

“Okay.”

“Woof.”

They recovered as quickly as they’d been dismayed. Fran’s ears and Jet’s tail returned to their neutral positions. In fact, Jet looked more dignified than before, which irked me somewhat.

But we will not be cooking curry today. I say we, but you’re going to be the one cooking, Fran.

“Oh yeah.”

Did you forget about that...?

“I thought we were just having curry again.”

I-I see.

Fran’s obsession with curry was terrifying.

All right, Chef Fran. What are we eating today?

“Today we’re having wild greens.”

Wild greens, really?

“Hm.”

Fran nodded confidently, but I had my doubts. They might not seem like much, but wild greens were tricky to cook. The options available to us for preparing them were limited, and you had to counteract the bitterness in most of them. I didn’t even know what wild greens we had in stock.

“I asked around the other day.”

In that village we stopped by?

“Hm.”

Fran and I would sometimes split up during our journeys; me staying stay back at the inn to cook while Fran and Jet went out for a walk. Apparently, she’d used some of that time to learn the basics of cooking.

Do you have your ingredients in Pocket Dimension?

“Hm? No.”

What?

“We’re looking for an elusive wild green which withers an hour after it’s picked.”

Which means?

“We’re going to pick these elusive greens right now!”

And here I thought Fran had everything prepared. Can you

blame me? Earlier, she'd said, *"There's something I want to eat so I'll do the cooking today."*

"Apparently, it grows deep in those mountains. We'll get Jet to sniff it out."

"W-Woof?"

"We're counting on your nose, Jet."

I guess she didn't ask around for details...

Doesn't look like we'll be done in three minutes.

Thirty minutes later.

Fran! No flame magic in the mountains! This could go really badly!

"Hrm."

Come on, Jet!

"Grrrr!"

We were currently surrounded by monsters.

Moments ago, vines had shot from the ground to lash at us; I'd thought at first that they were the tentacles of a worm or roper monster, but the leaves revealed that we were dealing with some kind of plant creature. The Poison Pot Killer, to be exact. It had to be an expert at camouflage, because we only realized what it was doing after it surrounded us.

That said, it wasn't a powerful monster—we just had to be careful with its poisonous thorns. One round of Fran's fire spells and Jet's dark spells quickly took it down.

Fran sniffed the air.

What is it, Fran?

"Something smells good."

Oh. I think it because you burnt parts of that plant monster. These things look edible, although they're probably not tasty. Should we store them?

"Hm... No. It's not good."

Of course.

As rare as this monster was, it had average nutritional value and tasted gross. We didn't need it, since we were on the hunt for tasty wild greens.

"Its name is popoki."

Popoki? Never heard of it.

“Apparently it’s white, long, and slimy.”

Uhh... Are you sure it’s a wild green?

“Hm. It grows underground.”

Oooh, it sounds like mountain yam.

I guess that counted as a wild green. The Japanese mountain yam was white, long, and turned slimy when you grated it. My Cooking Skill identified it as a type of mountain yam, though it had some differences from the Earth version. I couldn’t find the term “popoki,” but given that people had local names for their vegetables back on earth, it was probably what the locals called mountain yams here.

“Go look for popoki, Jet.”

“A-Arf.”

Jet whined pathetically at Fran’s orders. As good as his nose was, he couldn’t track something he had never smelled before.

“No?”

“Woof.”

“Hrm...”

Fran folded her arms, thinking of another way to find the elusive root. Conventional wisdom dictated that you should look for the vines and go from there, but I wasn’t sure whether I should tell her. Hunting down wild greens on her own might be a lot of fun, but it might also take a lot of time...

“We’ll turn up the earth with land magic and—”

Stop! I know how to look for it! We couldn’t go ruining the environment just to find wild greens!

“You do?”

Yeah. See if you can’t find some slender vines.

“Now that you mention it, that’s what the old man told me to do.”

We had to find these mountain yams before Fran lost her patience and dug up our surroundings. Thankfully, our efforts were soon rewarded, and we spotted leaves that looked exactly like the ones back home.

That’s the one! Get digging, boy!

“Woof!”

Jet happily obliged my command. The direwolf was a dog, all right. He dug joyously into the ground, kicking up dirt everywhere. A few minutes later, the head of a large mountain yam revealed itself.

“It looks brown.”

That’s just the soil. All we need to do is wash it and—voila!

“It’s white now.”

A quick water spell revealed the white skin of the mountain yam. The long and white plant was the wild green we were looking for.

“We’ll cook it and eat it,” Fran said.

She cut the mountain yam into round slices, produced a frying pan, and began to sauté them. She’d said this thing was only good within an hour of picking, but it didn’t seem to be withering fast... Maybe it was a matter of freshness.

Fran, who had to be starving by now, plucked one of the yam rounds out of the pan with her fingers and popped it into her mouth. She gave Jet a mountain yam steak and he devoured it immediately.

“Munch, munch.”

How is it?

“Hm. Tasty!”

“Woof!”

The mountain yam steak was crispy and delicious. Afterward, they enjoyed curry with freshly grated tororo and with mountain yam tempura. Both Fran and Jet were replete and satisfied by the end of their meal.

We should head back.

“I promised the old man I’d bring back extra.”

Fran was willingly giving away delicious food to other people... She really had grown!

All right! We’ll find as many as we can!

“Hm!”

We continued digging for mountain yams and ended up with a haul of twenty. They were easy enough to dig up with earth magic once you knew what to look for.

The Poison Pot Killer we killed earlier was already withering when we came back. A swarm of insects had covered it, eating the bits that Fran had burned. Its remains would soon return to the earth.

When we returned to the village, Fran made a beeline for the store.

“Oh, you’re back! Did you manage to hunt down some popoki?”

“Hm. I got some for you, too.”

“Why, that’s very nice of you. It’s awful dangerous out there in the mountains. One wrong step can cost an old man his life!”

“Here.”

Fran took our leftover mountain yams from Pocket Dimension, still as fresh as the moment we picked them. But the old man only tilted his head upon seeing them.

“Aren’t those mountain yams?”

“Hm? I thought these were popoki.”

“Oh, these aren’t popoki.”

Fran glanced at me.

Uhh, seriously?

The old man went on to explain that the popoki was a plant type monster.

“You burn the creature’s vines and peel it back to reveal its long, white, and slimy inner parts. That part’s the delicacy. It’s not particularly tasty, but it certainly is unique. You don’t see many of them here, and it’s a tough monster to fight because of its poison.”

Hang on. Poison, vines, rare? That sounded awful familiar.

“Is it the Poison Pot Killer?”

“That’s the one. We call it Popoki for short, you see. I thought I mentioned that.”

“You might have... Probably.”

Fran!

“All I remember was that it was elusive, white, long, and slimy.”

... I see.

“Well, I’m happier with these mountain yams, anyway. Popoki are rare, but they’re not very good.”

“No. I have to try it. I’ll go back.”

We are?

“Of course.”

Of course...

“Hm.”

The sun’s going down, though. Can’t it wait till tomorrow?

“No. I’ve made up my mind. We have to eat popoki by the end of the day.”

A-All right.

We returned to the mountains, but it was midnight by the time we found and killed another popoki. Judging by Fran and Jet’s expressions when they ate it, it tasted... dubious. They even topped themselves up with another round of curry afterward.

“...Mountain yams are good enough.”

“Woof.”

Rare foods weren’t always delicious as well.

Well, as long as you’ve learned—

“I hear there’s a legendary fruit over in the next village. That one has to be good.”

Look, that’s not—

“We’re going to eat it.”

“Woof!”

...All right.

“Hm!”

Well, I would humor her until she got bored.

Fran Goes Snowboarding

STORY: Yuu Tanaka

ART: Tomowo Maruyama



WOO-HOO!

SO THIS IS SNOWBOARDING.

IT'S PRETTY FUN.

Teacher

FSSSHHHH



SLIP

THE SPEED, THIS FEELING OF GRAVITY PULLING ME ON...

THIS CRISP FEELING OF SNOW... YOU CAN'T GET IT ANYWHERE ELSE.

FSSSH

ROLL

ROLL

ISN'T TELEKINETIC AIR RIPE MORE FUN?

WOOSH

HEH HEH YOU DON'T GET IT, TEACHER.



END



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